Women's and men's style: fact or fiction? New grammatical evidence

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The idea that there is a gender-specific style of writing has been around for a long time in literary studies. In linguistics there is also a fairly long-standing tradition of talking about *women's language* or *women's style*, but the focus of this line of research has traditionally been speech rather than writing. So far, empirical studies have focussed on phonological aspects (e.g. Trudgill's, Milroy's or Cheshire's well-known work), lexical aspects ("women's words", cf. Lakoff 1975 or Schmid's contribution to Corpus Linguistics 2001 to be published in the Leech-Festschrift), and especially on styles of discourse and discourse behaviour ("women's cooperative style", Tannen, Coates, Mulac and others). Investigations of grammatical aspects of gender-specific language have typically looked at questions, especially tag-questions, and a small number of other grammatical features that were envisaged to provide surface evidence for underlying gender-specific discourse styles. These handpicked areas aside, grammatical markers of gender-specific style have hardly been studied so far.

This is the gap that the present paper wants to fill by investigating the gender-specific use of such basic grammatical categories as the definite article, personal pronouns, nominal pre- and postmodifiers and various types of verbs in the spoken part of ICE-GB. It will be shown that statistically significant gender-specific differences in the frequency of such features can be found. The findings indicate that even under highly similar contextual circumstances women tend to use a more "involved" style of speaking and men a more "detached" one (cf. Chafe 1982, Chafe and Danielewicz 1987).

Methodologically, this study is a substantial refinement as compared to Schmid's 2001 paper, which focussed almost exclusively on the parameter gender and thus neglected the influence of other user-related (age, education, social class etc.) and use-related factors (field of discourse, setting, topic, social roles). The range of interfering variables (most notably the important variables field of discourse and topic) will be narrowed down systematically by focussing on mixed-sex conversations with balanced contributions by male and female speakers. (For a complementary study on same-sex conversations and a methodology for detecting gender-specific patterns of linguistic features see the abstract for this conference by Fauth and Schmid).