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Gender Differences in Lexical Choices among Learners of English at the National University of Lesotho

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ABSTRACT

Despite ongoing sociological research, there is no clear consensus on gender-based differences in language use, particularly in terms of lexical choices. This gap underscores the need for further research. The present study aims to contribute to this area by examining gender differences in the use of lexis among students at the National University of Lesotho. Using a mixed-methods approach and employing the dominance and difference theories, the study examines how male and female students differ in their use of modal verbs, interjections, politeness markers, intensifiers, and hedges. Data were collected through self-administered, scenario-based questionnaires distributed to a randomly selected sample of 42 students. The scenarios were designed to elicit responses that usually incorporate the target linguistic features. The analysis began with the qualitative component, focusing on the thematic categorisation and contextual use of the vocabulary. This was followed by quantitative analysis, using descriptive statistics and inferential techniques to determine whether observed differences were statistically significant. Results revealed gender differences in the use of all lexical features except polite markers, which were used equally by both groups. Significantly, despite these observed patterns, none of the differences were statistically significant according to log-likelihood calculations.

Keywords: Discourse Features; Gender Differences; Language and Gender; Lexis; Sociolinguistics

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ARTICLE INFO

Received: 5 December 2025 | Revised: 5 February 2026 | Accepted: 13 February 2026 | Published Online: 20 February 2026
DOI: https://doi.org/10.55121/le.v3i1.1007

CITATION

Mahao, M., Seepheephe, N., 2026. Gender Differences in Lexical Choices among Learners of English at the National University of Lesotho. Linguistic Exploration. 3(1): 12–26. DOI: https://doi.org/10.55121/le.v3i1.1007

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1. Introduction

Gender differences have been studied in many parts of the world through a variety of domains, including psychology, sociolinguistics, and linguistics. In the field of linguistics, one of the central issues has been the question of whether there are differences between males and females in their use of language. An examination of the literature in this area shows that this question is far from being settled, with different studies on the issues producing contrasting results; while some scholars argue that there are differences between males and females, other scholars argue that there are no differences in how males and females use language [1–3]. This discrepancy between scholars regarding the issue of whether males and females use language differently necessitates further research on the issue.

To provide new insights on the issue of language and gender, the current study focuses on the context that has received little attention from scholars, namely, the context of English learning. For a framework, the study uses the tenets of dominance and difference theories. The study explores and compares the use of vocabulary between males and females among English learners at the National University of Lesotho. The approach taken by this paper is important as it deals with two important topics: the area of language and gender and the area of English learning, at the same time. The use of English in Lesotho can be attributed to the country's colonial history with Britain. In 1868, Lesotho, which was then referred to as Basutoland by the English-speaking people, became a British Protectorate and was initially administered through the Cape Colony under indirect British rule [4]. Britain assumed direct control in 1884, which lasted to 1966, when Lesotho gained independence. As is the case in other former colonies of Britain, English serves as one of the official languages in Lesotho [5]. In academic institutions, language plays two major roles, which are important for research on English learning. The basic one is its role as the medium of instruction [6]. Using the data obtained from the undergraduate students at the University, the paper set out to unravel the influence of gender on the use of English lexis among Basotho.

Drawing on key principles of dominance and difference theory, which propose that linguistic variation can be either a reflection of social power inequalities or communicative style differences, the study aims to answer the following questions:

a. What are the differences in lexis use between male and female students at the National University of Lesotho?
b. What are the similarities in lexis use between the two gender groups?
c. What are the possible reasons for differences and similarities in vocabulary among the two groups?

Language and gender have emerged as a prominent area of inquiry over the years. Scholarly interest in the relationship between language and gender increased during the feminist movements of the 1970s and 1980s in Western contexts, where researchers sought to examine how linguistic practices both reflect and reproduce gendered social relations [7, 8]. Early work in this area laid the foundation for subsequent theoretical debates by highlighting systematic differences in the speech patterns of men and women, although much of this research was conducted primarily in Western Europe and North America.

Research on language and gender has generally been based on three major theoretical approaches: deficit, dominance, and difference. The deficit approach, whose major proponent is Lakoff, conceptualises women's language as linguistically weaker or less authoritative than men's, arguing that women's use of features such as hedges, tag questions, and intensifiers reflects social insecurity and marginalisation. While this framework was important in highlighting gendered inequalities, it has been widely criticised for implicitly treating male language as the normative standard.

In response to these limitations, the dominance approach emerged, shifting attention from linguistic deficiency to structural power relations. Proponents of this view argue that gendered linguistic differences come from unequal social hierarchies, with women's communicative styles reflecting subordinate positions in male-dominated societies [9, 10]. From this perspective, features such as politeness markers and hedges are interpreted as strategies for adapting within asymmetrical power relations rather than indicators of weakness. This study employs these tenets of the theory, with contextual power dynamics considered in the analysis of the language use by the participants, as a result of contextual factors. It is important, however, to indicate that the dominance-based explanations have been criticised for oversimplifying

power dynamics and for ignoring contextual variation[11, 12]. To mitigate against the challenges brought about by use of dominance theory, the study employs it together with the difference theory, which similar to the dominance theory, foregrounds context in the explanation of differences in use of language between males and females.

The difference approach views men and women as members of distinct communicative subcultures shaped by divergent socialisation processes[13]. Rather than evaluating linguistic variation between males and females in terms of power, this approach treats gender differences as the consequence of different styles and choices during interactions. Within this framework, women's frequent use of hedges, politeness markers, and facilitative tag questions is interpreted as reflecting cooperative and rapport-oriented communicative goals rather than powerlessness. Importantly, this approach challenges deficit-based interpretations by emphasising communicative effectiveness over dominance.

Empirical research investigating gender differences in linguistic features has produced inconsistent and sometimes contradictory findings. While some studies report significant gender-based variation in the use of hedges, intensifiers, and politeness strategies[14, 15], others suggest minimal or context-dependent differences[16–18]. Holmes'[19] seminal study on tag questions further complicates deficit interpretations by demonstrating that men used more modal tags than women, while women favored facilitative tags aimed at sustaining interaction. These findings challenge the assumption that women's use of tag questions signals uncertainty and instead highlight their role in discourse management and conversational support.

Research focusing on vocabulary and pragmatic features similarly shows these different patterns. Studies using the deficit and dominance frameworks often report higher frequencies of hedging, intensifiers, and tag questions among women, attributing these patterns to social power asymmetries[15, 20]. However, alternative interpretations suggest that such features function as interactional resources rather than markers of inferiority, reinforcing the need for context-based analysis.

Despite the extensive body of research on language and gender, studies situated in African contexts appear to be comparatively few. This is especially the case within higher education settings. The existing African-based studies have primarily examined informal interactions or on local languages. For example, Obeng[21] found that women in Akan discourse employed more indirect speech acts, while men appeared to prefer direct forms. Rutherford[22] observed similar patterns in Swahili. Rutherford's study shows women using more formal and courteous expressions. In the context of Lesotho, Rapeane[23] reports gendered variation in vocabulary use, with males, particularly in rural areas, employing more direct and impolite forms than women, who are reported to use more politeness strategies and generally avoid face-threatening acts.

While these studies provide valuable insights, they focus largely on local languages and everyday interactions, leaving a gap in understanding how gendered linguistic practices manifest among African university students using English as a second language in academic or semi-academic contexts. Moreover, few studies explicitly examine multiple lexical and pragmatic features simultaneously within controlled communicative scenarios. This situation leaves the question of how female and male learners at institutions in different Southern African countries, such as Lesotho, are open. Equally important, another question that needs answering is the one about the factors that influence any similarities or differences seen across genders in these contexts.

The present study seeks to address this gap by examining gender differences in the use of modal verbs, interjections, politeness markers, intensifiers, and hedges among undergraduate English language learners at the National University of Lesotho. By situating the analysis within established theoretical debates and extending empirical investigation to an under-researched African higher education context, the study contributes to a more insightful and contextually grounded understanding of gendered language use.

The study has been able to uncover language patterns between males and females at the National University of Lesotho. The study has revealed the similarities and differences between the two groups and used statistical analysis to establish if any differences are statistically significant.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Approach

This study uses a mixed-method approach combining both qualitative and quantitative research designs. The

mixed-method was adopted in this study to accommodate the multifaceted nature of the research objectives. Specifically, the qualitative component was essential for analyzing the linguistic features under investigation and the contexts in which they occurred. These aspects required interpretive, context-sensitive analysis to uncover patterns in language use that might not be evident through numerical data alone.

At the same time, a quantitative approach was necessary to examine how the variable of gender influenced the use of specific lexical items. This included assessing the frequency and distribution of linguistic features across male and female participants. The quantitative analysis aimed to establish whether measurable differences existed between the two groups and, crucially, whether those differences were statistically significant. Log-likelihood calculations and other inferential statistical tools were used to support this analysis.

2.2. Population and Sampling

The population of the study comprise of undergraduate students learning English at the National University of Lesotho. Participants were selected from first-year and second-year students enrolled in the Faculty of Social Sciences.

A stratified random sampling technique was employed, with gender as the stratification variable. Random sampling is a method used to select a subset of individuals from a large population in such a way that each individual has a chance of being chosen [24]. This method was chosen because it gives each element in the population an equal chance of being selected. The population was first divided into male and female strata, after which participants were randomly selected from each group. This procedure ensured balanced gender representation, given that gender was the primary independent variable in the study. Overall, a total of 42 participants were selected, comprising 21 male and 21 female students. Regarding sample size, it is important to note that the standard error depends on it [25]. According to Bougie and Sekaran [26], an appropriate sample size ranges between 30 and 500 subjects. The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 35 years. No further stratification was applied with respect to age, year of study, discipline, or linguistic background. Age was included as a secondary independent variable to determine whether age-related patterns influenced lexical usage. It was recorded as a continuous variable and later grouped into relevant age brackets for analysis, where applicable.

The dependent variables were the lexical features produced by participants in response to specific communicative scenarios. These were operationalized as follows: modal verbs, interjections, politeness markers, intensifiers, and hedges.

The two groups studied English as a second language, with the age range from 18 to 35. The primary variable under investigation in this study was gender, with the goal of determining whether male and female participants differ in their use of lexical items. Age was included as a secondary independent variable to determine whether age-related patterns influence lexical usage. It was recorded as a continuous variable and later grouped into relevant age brackets for analysis, where applicable. The dependent variables were the lexical features produced by participants in response to specific communicative scenarios. These were operationalized as follows: modal verbs, interjections, politeness markers, intensifiers, and hedges.

With regard to sample size, methodological literature suggests that samples ranging between 30 and 500 participants may be considered acceptable for empirical studies [26]. Nevertheless, the relatively small sample size in the present study constitutes a limitation, particularly for quantitative analyses, and may restrict the generalisability of the findings beyond the immediate research context. Additionally, while qualitative examples are provided to illustrate patterns of lexical usage, these examples are drawn from the same small sample and cannot be assumed to represent broader trends. Consequently, the results should be interpreted as exploratory, reflecting patterns within the sampled population rather than making broad population-level claims.

2.3. Variables and Measurements

This study investigates gender-based differences in lexical choices, focusing on five specific linguistic features: modal verbs, interjections, politeness markers, intensifiers, and hedges. Two primary types of variables were identified and measured in this study:

2.3.1. Independent Variables

- **Gender**: Participants were categorized as male or female based on self-identification. Gender was treated as

a categorical independent variable to examine its effect on the use of specific lexical features.

2.3.2. Dependent Variables

This section shows how the dependent variables, modal verbs, interjections, politeness markers, and intensifiers are operationalized in this study.

- **Modal Verbs**
  - Operational definition: Modal verbs were defined as auxiliary verbs expressing modality, including obligation, possibility, permission, or necessity (e.g., *can*, *could*, *may*, *might*, *must*, *should*, *will*, and *would*).
  - Coding criteria: Each occurrence of a modal verb was identified and coded manually. Tokens were counted only when the modal functioned as a grammatical auxiliary, excluding lexical uses (e.g., *will* as a noun).
- **Interjections**
  - Operational definition: Interjections were defined as lone or clause-initial expressions conveying emotional reaction, attitude, or discourse management, typically syntactically independent of the clause.
  - Coding criteria: Items such as *oh, ah, wow, hey,* and *huh* were coded as interjections when they occurred independently or preceded an utterance and expressed affect or reaction.
- **Politeness Markers**
  - Operational definition: Politeness markers were defined as lexical items or phrases (multi-word expressions) that are used to mitigate imposition or express social courtesy, especially to save face.
  - Coding criteria: Forms such as *please, thank you, sorry, excuse me,* and indirect request constructions (e.g., *could you*) were coded as politeness markers when their function was interactional rather than propositional.

While both interjections and politeness markers function pragmatically, interjections were distinguished by their primary role in expressing affective or spontaneous reactions and their independent role syntactically. Politeness markers, by contrast, were identified based on their social-relational function of mitigating face-threatening acts or signalling courtesy. Discourse markers such as *well, you know,* and *so* were left out except in a situation in which they fulfilled these specific functional criteria.

- **Intensifiers**
  - Operational definition: Intensifiers were defined as adverbs or modifiers that amplify the degree or force of an adjective, verb, or clause.
  - Coding criteria: Items such as *very, really, so,* and *extremely* were coded as intensifiers when they increased emphasis rather than serving a literal descriptive function.
- **Hedges**
  - Operational definition: Hedges were defined as linguistic devices that reduce the speaker's commitment to the propositional content or soften the force of an utterance.
  - Coding criteria: Forms such as *maybe, kind of, sort of, I think,* and *perhaps* were coded as hedges when they signaled uncertainty or tentativeness.

All data were coded by the first author, and a subset (20%) was independently checked by a second researcher. Agreement on coding decisions was 90%, ensuring consistency in the identification of linguistic features.

2.4. Data Collection Methods and Procedures

This study uses self-administered questionnaires (see **Appendix A**). Self-administered questionnaires refer to questionnaires that require the participants to complete the data on their own, without the presence or direct assistance of the researcher. This type of questionnaire was employed because it allows the participants to take as much time as possible in responding to questions, and it allows the participants flexibility regarding the time at which they decide to respond to the different questions. The questionnaire comprised the following sections: Section A and Section B. Section A required information related to the demographic profile of the respondents.

Section B consisted of questions that were based on nine different scenarios. The respondents were asked to state the responses that they could offer in each of the scenarios.

- **Item 1**

Participants were given a situation in which they had to offer an opinion about the setting of a party that they attended. This scenario was designed to elicit naturalistic responses containing modal verbs.

- **Item 2**

Participants were given a situation in which they had to command their classmate to close the door to maintain a comfortable temperature in the classroom. This scenario aimed to elicit responses that contain polite markers.

- **Item 3**

Participants were given a situation in which they had to express their feelings towards a valley. This scenario aimed to elicit responses that contain interjections.

- **Item 4**

Participants were given a situation in which they had to describe an event they attended to a friend. This scenario aimed to elicit responses that contain intensifiers.

- **Item 5**

Participants were given a situation in which they had to share sad news of someone's passing. This scenario aimed to elicit responses that contain hedges.

2.5. Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are important in research [27]. At the time the study was conducted (and currently), the Faculty of Humanities at the National University of Lesotho did not have a formal Research Ethics Committee responsible for issuing protocol approval codes. Instead, individual departments within the Faculty determine whether proposed research complies with the University's ethical guidelines.

Accordingly, permission to conduct the study was obtained from the Department of English before the commencement of data collection. Additional permission was sought from and granted by the selected faculties where the research was conducted.

Additionally, participants were informed about the study and its purposes. Respondents were not forced to answer questionnaires if they did not want to answer certain questions. The participants were made aware that the research is voluntary and may withdraw at any point without any loss. The participants' names were kept anonymous and their responses confidential [28]. All ethical issues were observed, including the use of the Harvard referencing style convention throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study (see **Appendix A**), and they also consented to publish this paper.

2.6. Data Analysis

First, there is the use of use of the thematic analysis to identify, analyse, and interpret patterns within the data.

Then there is the quantitative analysis, in which statistical tools are used to analyse and interpret the data.

For assessing the statistical significance between gender differences and language use, Rayson's (n.d) log likelihood and effective size calculator was used for this purpose. Rayson's log-likelihood calculator is an online tool that is used to perform statistical analysis between two corpora. The calculator is used to determine whether the difference in frequency of a particular word or linguistic feature, such as an intensifier, between two corpora (or groups, like male vs. female speakers) is statistically significant, or just due to chance. The calculator measures the difference using log-likelihood (G^2 value). According to this calculator, the higher the log likelihood (G^2 value), the more significant the difference between two frequency scores. A G^2 of 3.84 or higher is significant at the level of $p < 0.05$, and a G^2 of 6.6 or higher is significant at $p < 0.01$.

95th percentile; 5% level; $p < 0.05$; critical value = 3.84

99th percentile; 1% level; $p < 0.01$; critical value = 6.63

99.9th percentile; 0.1% level; $p < 0.001$; critical value = 10.83

99.99th percentile; 0.01% level; $p < 0.0001$; critical value = 15.13

3. Results

3.1. Modal Verbs

Participants were given a situation in which they had to offer an opinion about the setting of a party they attended. This scenario aimed to give the participants an opportunity to provide responses that contained modal verbs.

3.1.1. The Use of Each Modal Verb by Gender

Table 1 shows the use of each modal verb by gender.

Table 1. Modal Verbs per Gender.

Modal Verbs	Females	Males
Should	8	7
Would	6	4
Can	3	3
Must	1	0
Will	2	2
Might	1	1
Total	21	17

As **Table 1** reveals, the female respondents used three of the modal verbs more frequently than their male counterparts. These modal verbs are "should", "would", and "must". Quite significantly, these modal verbs differ in function, with "should" and "must" expressing obligation or necessity, while "would" could be considered tentative. This pattern, combined with the similarity in the use of the other modal verbs across genders, suggests that the modal verbs reflect communicative strategies aligned with the difference approach, where individuals may favour forms that maintain interactional harmony or express social engagement, rather than indicating weakness. From a dominance perspective, the relatively balanced use of modal verbs between genders further suggests that, in this academic context, hierarchical power inequalities are not significant, a situation that leads to discourse that does not reflect the traditional gendered power differences.

3.1.2. The Context in Which Modal Verbs Are Used by Males and Females

(1) "Should"

Both male and female participants used "**should"** as a way of giving a suggestion rather than an obligation, trying to make words less authoritative and more open for discussion on whether the party should be indoors or in the yard. Some males and females used **"should"** as a way of advising others.

An example is the sample below:

> Male 1—"The party **should** be held outside."
> Female 0—"My friend **should** make the party indoors to avoid damage of things or even have to stop the party if it rains."

(2) "Would"

Both male and female participants used the modal verb **would** to portray politeness, tentativeness, and to make their statements less direct.

An example is the sample below:

> Male 1— "I **would** suggest that he holds it indoors because the weather might change."
> Female 0—"Whatever you feel comfortable with, you have my support, but I **would** suggest that you have it inside."

(3) "Must"

Must was only used by females, and it was used to portray a strong sense of necessity or obligation.

An example is the sample below:

> Female 0—"In the yard, however, indoors **must** be prepared in the case the rain falls."

The contextual information supports the idea that the choice of each modal verb depends on the communicative goal and style rather than deficiency. Also, the use of modal verbs such as "must" to show obligation by females, while the males did not use it, supports this idea, while additionally showing that lack of power imbalances within academic settings play a major role in structuring the language used by males and females.

3.1.3. Modal Verbs Results Obtained from the Log Likelihood Calculator Test

Statistical analysis of modal verb usage revealed no significant difference between males and females, further supporting the fact that in this context the use of language is similar across gender. Females used 21 modal verbs, while males used 17. The log-likelihood test produced a G^2 value of 0.12 ($p = 0.73$), which is much below the standard significance threshold of 3.84. In plain language, this indicates that the observed difference could easily have occurred by

chance, and therefore, male and female participants used modal verbs at comparable frequencies.

3.2. Politeness Markers

Participants were given a situation in which they had to command their classmate to close the door to maintain a comfortable temperature in the classroom. The aim of this scenario was to elicit responses that contain polite markers. The politeness markers are referred to as words or phrases in a sentence that are used to portray politeness and respect [7]. Politeness markers that were used for this study are "please" and "kindly".

3.2.1. The Use of Each Politeness Marker by Gender

Table 2 shows the use of each politeness marker by males and females.

Table 2. Politeness Markers per Gender.

Politeness Markers	Females	Males
Please	13	14
Kindly	3	2
Total	16	16

As can be seen in **Table 2**, there are also similarities in the use of major politeness markers. While males have used "please" more than females, females have used "kindly" more frequently. These finding too aligns with the with the different approach, where individuals may favour forms that maintain interactional harmony and harmony. Also, the use of more politeness markers by males shows very little power inequality between the participants.

3.2.2. The Context in Which the Politeness Markers Are Used by Males and Females

(1) "Please"

Both the male and female participants used "please" as a way to ask Lerato politely to close the door while maintaining a respectful and considerate tone towards her.

An example of a sample:

Male 1—"Lerato, **please** close the door."
Female 0—"Could you **please** close the door?"

(2) "Kindly"

Both the female and the male participants use "kindly" in their statements to try to be polite in their suggestions.

An example of a sample:

Male 1—"Lerato, you left the door open and it feels cold, may you **kindly** close the door".
Females 0—"May you **kindly** close the door."

The fact that the politeness markers are used in similar context provide further evidence for the similarities in the use of these strategies.

3.2.3. Polite Markers Results Obtained from Tests

The test for significance affirms the idea that the two groups use politeness markers in a similar way. The log-likelihood test yielded a G^2 value of 0.03 ($p = 0.86$), which is very much below the standard significance threshold of 3.84. In plain language, this indicates that the observed frequencies are essentially the same across genders, suggesting that male and female students used politeness markers at comparable rates.

3.3. Interjections

Participants were given a situation in which they had to express their feelings towards a view of the valley. The aim of this scenario was to elicit responses that contain interjections used as interjections.

3.3.1. The Use of Each Interjection by Gender

Table 3 indicates the use of each interjection by males and females.

Table 3. Interjections per Gender.

Interjections	Females	Males
Wow	9	9
OMG	2	0
Total	11	9

In **Table 3**, there is a distinction between the male and female respondents in the use of one of the interjections. While females used the interjection "omg" twice, the males did not use it at all. However, there is a similarity in the use of "wow", with both groups using it nine times. From a difference-theory perspective, this use of "omg" by female respondents only may reflect a certain style that is associated with expressive or affective engagement rather than a fundamental difference that is based on gender. The similarity

in the use of "wow" suggests that certain interjections function as common discourse resources that transcend gender, particularly in academic or similar contexts.

From a dominance perspective, the absence of "omg" among male respondents may be explained as due to social norms that discourage an explicit expression among men, instead of differences in linguistic competence or pragmatic awareness. The equal use of "wow" indicates that when an interjection is socially neutral and contextually acceptable, both male and female speakers employ it similarly.

3.3.2. The Context in Which Interjections Are Used by Males and Females

"Wow"

Both used "wow' as a way to show admiration of the beautiful valley. They used interjections "wow" to indicate the amazement at how good the valley looks.

An example of a sample:

"Wow"

Male 1—"**Wow**! The valley looks good."

Female 0—"**Wow**! The view of the valley is very amazing."

3.3.3. Results Obtained from Tests (Interjections)

The analysis of interjection usage revealed no significant difference between males and females in the overall use of interjections. Females used 11 interjections, while males used 9. The log-likelihood test produced a G^2 value of 0.25 ($p = 0.62$), which is well below the standard significance threshold of 3.84. In plain language, this indicates that the observed difference is small and could easily have occurred by chance, suggesting that both genders used interjections at similar frequencies.

3.4. Intensifiers

Participants were given a situation in which they had to describe an event they attended to a friend. This scenario aimed to elicit responses that contain intensifiers.

3.4.1. The Use of Each Intensifier by Gender

Table 4 shows the intensifiers used by each gender.

Table 4 shows similar patterns for both groups. One intensifier ("really") is used equally by both groups. Although three intensifiers are used more frequently by males, the difference in two of these is one. Also, females have used the intensifier "very" more frequently than their male counterparts. These trends are similar to the ones observed earlier with regards to modal verbs and politeness markers. The differences observed appear to be stylistic issues rather than deficiency or power asymmetries, which appear to be minimal in the setting in which the study took place.

Table 4. Intensifiers per Gender.

Intensifiers	Females	Males
Really	1	1
Very	2	0
So	3	4
Supremely	0	1
Extremely	0	1
Total	6	7

3.4.2. The Context in Which Intensifiers Are Used by Males and Females

"So"

An exploration of the contexts in which the intensifiers are used shows that they were used in a similar way across the two groups. Both male and female participants used the intensifier "so" as a way to emphasise the degree to which the NUL fresher's party was funny, implying that the party was enjoyable. The Example of the use of "so" to emphasise is used in the samples below:

Female 0 = "It was **so** fun and everyone was dressed so elegantly."

Male 1 = "The party was welcoming and it was **so** good to be there."

The participants who did not use intensifiers used a neutral description of the experiences. An example of this sentence is "It was a nice, experience, just unwinding."

3.4.3. Results Obtained from Tests (Intensifiers)

Analysis of intensifier usage revealed no significant difference between males and females. Females used 6 intensifiers, while males used 7. The log-likelihood test yielded a G^2 value of 1.20 ($p = 0.27$), which is below the standard sig-

nificance threshold of 3.84. In plain language, this indicates that the observed difference is small and likely due to chance, suggesting that both genders used intensifiers at comparable frequencies.

3.5. Hedges

Participants were given a situation in which they had to share sad news of someone's passing. This scenario aimed to elicit responses that contain hedges.

3.5.1. The Use of Each Hedge by Males and Females

Table 5 shows the use of each hedge by gender.

Table 5. Hedges per Gender.

Hedges	Females	Males
I don't think	13	14
I really	1	1
I believe	1	1
Total	15	16

As revealed by **Table 5**, there are more similarities than distinctions between male and female respondents in the use of hedges. Although the number of males who used "I don't think" is slightly higher (14 versus 13), only one participant from each group used "I really" and "I believe". From a difference-theory perspective, this similarity in performance between the two groups suggests that hedging, similar to the other strategies given in the previous sections, functions as a shared pragmatic strategy rather than a gender-specific feature. Seemingly, its use is influenced by speakers' attempts to manage stance, mitigate claims, and to show cooperation in academic contexts such as a university setting.

From a dominance perspective, the balanced use of hedges may indicate reduced gendered power asymmetries within the university setting, where institutional norms encourage one to use a cautious and reasoned expression regardless of his or her gender. All in all, the data suggest that hedge usage among these respondents is shaped more by contextual and institutional expectations than by gender. This is confirmed by the exploration of the text in which the hedges are used, as presented in the next section.

3.5.2. The Context in Which Hedges Is Used by Both Males and Females

"I Don't Know"

In the samples of participants' responses above, the hedge "I don't think" portrays uncertainty about whether or not they are the right people to pass the message to the friend. Both males and females, during their responses, made use of the hedge "I don't think" as a way of showing uncertainty or to mitigate the harshness of rejecting a request.

An example of a sample:

> Male 1—"I **don't think** I'm the right person to share the news."
> Female 0—"This is sad but **I don't think** I have the right words to console her."

3.5.3. Results Obtained from Tests (Hedges)

Statistical analysis of hedge usage revealed no significant difference between male and female participants. Females used 15 hedges, while males used 16. The log-likelihood test yielded a G^2 value of 0.21 ($p = 0.65$), which is well below the standard significance threshold of 3.84. In plain language, this indicates that the observed difference is minimal and likely due to chance, suggesting that both genders used hedges at comparable frequencies.

Figure 1 is a bar chart summarizing the usage of the five linguistic features by gender. The bar chart illustrates the raw frequency counts of five linguistic features, namely, modal verbs, politeness markers, interjections, intensifiers, and hedges, used by male and female participants. Blue bars represent male participants, and red bars represent female participants.

Females used modal verbs (21) and interjections (11) more frequently than males (modal verbs: 17; interjections: 9), while males used hedges (16) slightly more than females (15). Politeness markers and intensifiers showed relatively similar usage between genders. Twelve participants did not use modal verbs. The patterns recorded above align with the idea that overall, there are more similarities than differences in how the males and females in the sampled population use the selected linguistic features.

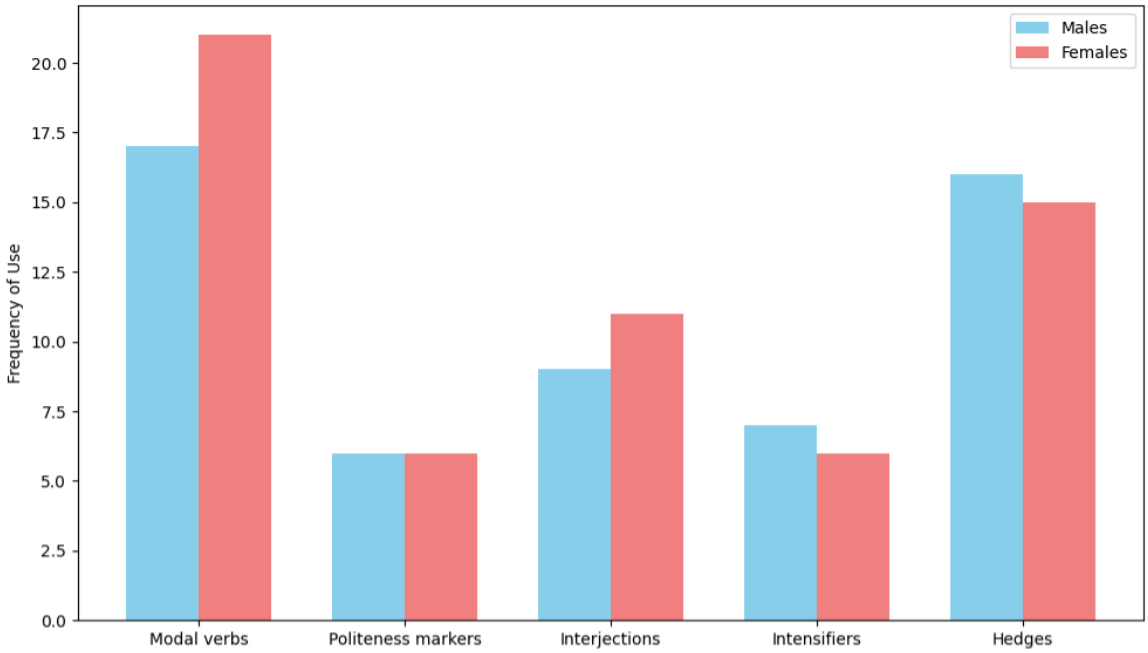


Figure 1. Comparison of Linguistic Feature Usage by Gender.

4. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine gender differences in lexical and pragmatic features among undergraduate students at the National University of Lesotho and to determine whether any observed differences were statistically significant. Five linguistic features were analysed: modal verbs, politeness markers, interjections, intensifiers, and hedges. While descriptive differences between male and female participants were observed across several features, statistical analysis revealed that these differences were not significant.

The absence of statistically significant gender differences suggests that male and female students in this context generally employ similar linguistic strategies. This finding aligns with research that challenges the assumption of predictable, universal gender differences in language use [16, 17] and supports arguments that linguistic behaviour is highly sensitive to context. In particular, Cameron [29] argues that features such as modal verbs are not inherently gendered but are shaped by situational demands and communicative goals, a position that is consistent with the findings of the present study.

With respect to modal verbs, although female participants demonstrated a slightly higher frequency of use than males, the difference was not statistically significant. This contrasts with interpretations basing themselves on the deficit model, which associates women's use of modal forms with uncertainty or lack of authority [7]. Instead, the findings lend support to difference-oriented and context-sensitive approaches, which view modal usage as a pragmatic resource rather than a marker of linguistic weakness.

Similar patterns were observed in the use of politeness markers. Contrary to studies conducted in informal or culturally distinct contexts where women reportedly use more politeness strategies than men [15], the present study found no meaningful gender variation. This suggests that within a university environment such as the one which served as the setting of the study, communicative norms may be relatively standardised, encouraging both male and female students to adopt similar interactional styles.

The findings relating to interjections and intensifiers further reinforce this interpretation. Although certain interjections were used exclusively by female participants, overall usage patterns did not differ significantly by gender. Likewise, while males exhibited a marginally higher use of intensifiers, this difference was statistically insignificant. These results echo the argument that pragmatic features often serve discourse-management functions rather than signaling gendered communicative traits [19].

Several sociocultural and educational factors may explain these findings. In the context of Lesotho's higher education system, male and female students are exposed to similar academic practices, institutional expectations, and forms of

social interaction. Such shared environments may reduce traditional gender-based linguistic differences, particularly when it comes to younger speakers. Additionally, increasing exposure to globalised academic discourse may contribute to the adoption of comparable communicative norms across genders.

The role of English as a second language is also significant. When operating in a non-native language, speakers may prioritise linguistic accuracy and appropriateness over stylistic variation. This may limit the expression of subtle pragmatic differences that are more apparent in native speakers' use. As a result, gender-linked patterns observed in native-speaker or informal contexts may not easily come out among ESL university students.

These results find the major tenets of dominance and difference theories. The results show that differences between males' and females' use of language are influenced by contextual factors rather than a lack of linguistic resources. This challenges the deficient model. The results show that the issue of dominance does not apply in a university setting, where there are minimal power asymmetries. Instead, the requirements of how people should communicate in an academic setting, where co-operation is emphasized, and hedging is one of the strategies that is encouraged as a way of avoiding threatening the face of others, seem to be the major factors.

Methodological considerations must also be acknowledged. The relatively small sample size and the use of controlled communicative scenarios where data were elicited instead of occurring naturally may have constrained the emergence of fine-grained gender differences. Moreover, focusing on specific lexical features may not capture more diversity in interactional strategies that could be revealed through naturalistic discourse analysis.

Finally, it is important to avoid overgeneralisation. The findings of this study are specific to undergraduate students at the National University of Lesotho and should be interpreted as context-bound and exploratory. They do not claim to represent gendered language use across all African contexts or among native speakers of English. Instead, the study contributes to a growing body of research suggesting that gendered linguistic behavior is shaped as much by sociocultural and educational contexts as by gender itself.

5. Conclusions

This study examined gender differences in one university in Lesotho. The focus has been on modal verbs, politeness markers, interjections, intensifiers, and hedges. Contrary to the proposals made by several previous studies about marked gender differences in these linguistic features, the findings of this study show no significant variation between the two groups. This suggests that, within the context of a modern university setting in Lesotho, male and female students may be converging in their linguistic behaviour, possibly due to shared academic environments, increased gender equality, and evolving social norms.

These findings provide new insight into the role of context in shaping language use, challenging long-held assumptions about gendered communication. They suggest that language patterns traditionally associated with either gender may not be as rigid or universally applicable as previously thought, especially within educational contexts that promote equal participation.

For education policymakers, these results underscore the importance of designing language and communication curricula that reflect contemporary linguistic realities rather than outdated gender stereotypes. Training programs for educators should emphasize inclusive and evidence-based understandings of student communication styles.

Further research is recommended to explore how variables such as discipline of study, cultural background, and exposure to global media might influence linguistic choices. Longitudinal studies could also be valuable in tracking whether these patterns persist or shift over time, offering deeper insight into the dynamics of gender and language use in Lesotho and similar contexts.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, M.M.; methodology, M.M. and N.S.; software, M.M.; validation, M.M. and N.S.; formal analysis, M.M.; investigation, M.M.; resources, M.M.; data curation, M.M.; writing—original draft preparation, M.M.; writing—review and editing, M.M. and N.S.; visualization, M.M. and N.S.; supervision, N.S.; project administration, N.S. Both authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding

This work received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement

The study was conducted in accordance with generally accepted ethical standards for research involving human participants. At the time the study was carried out, the Faculty of Humanities at the National University of Lesotho did not have a formal Institutional Review Board or Research Ethics Committee responsible for issuing protocol approval codes. Ethical oversight was provided at the departmental level. Permission to conduct the research was obtained from the Department of English, National University of Lesotho. Therefore, no formal protocol approval number was issued.

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study (see **Appendix A**), and they also consented to publish this paper.

Data Availability Statement

Due to ethical considerations, the data used to support this study is not publicly available, as it may jeopardize the confidentiality and privacy of participants.

Acknowledgments

The completion of this work could not have been possible without the National University of Lesotho for allowing us conduct this study in their premises. I am extending my sincere thanks to the Department of English and to the library staff for their endless support.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Appendix A. Questionnaire

It is a pleasure to have you participate in this survey and hope you find it interesting to complete. This survey uses interview to help investigate whether there are gender differences in lexis and syntax among the National University of Lesotho students.

Instructions:

Please answer each question with honesty and to the best of your ability.

Please remember that your participation is voluntary and you may skip over questions that you may prefer not to answer.

Your responses will be kept confidential and used for research purposes only.

Section A: Demographic Profile

Gender

Male	
Female	

Indicate the category that best represents your age

18–25	
26–35	
36–45	

Section B: Please Answer the Following Questions

l. Your friend is planning a surprise party for your other friend. He/she is unsure if the party should be held outside in the yard or indoors. The pleasant weather is the reason your friend wants to use the garden although is unsure if it will rain or not. If the friend asks for your opinion, what would you say?

2. You are in DTF 109 in an Entrepreneurship class in winter. Lerato, your classmate enters the classroom and leaves the door open. How would you tell her to close the door?

3. Pretend you and your group of friends are hiking in the mountains. There is a breathtaking overlook with a stunning view of the valley below. How would you express

this stunning view to somebody?

_____

_____

4. You are at a sales fair in need of a couch and you did not really hear if the seller said the couch is Ml 5000.00. You then decide to confirm the price with the person next to you. What would you say?

_____

_____

5. You attended the NUL fresher's party last night and one of your friends who did not attend is eager to know how the event went. In what way would you describe the event?

_____

_____

6. Your lecturer is organizing a debate and he needs you to be in charge and delegate duties. How would you tell Thabo to lead the research team?

_____

_____

7. A distant friend loses a loved one and you are asked to share the news to him/her by a mutual friend. You feel you are not the right person to deliver the sad news. How would you respond to the mutual friend?

_____

_____

8. You are driving to Roma and the car behind bumps into you due to over speeding. Upon arrival of police officers, you are requested to give a statement. How would you explain the incident?

_____

_____

9. As a male/female what factors cause gender difference in language use if any?

_____

_____

Your contribution is highly appreciated.

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