

**Gender, Power, Discipline, and Context:
On the Sociolinguistic Variation of *okay*, *right*, *like*, and *you know* in
English Academic Discourse**

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1. Introduction

This paper examines the sociolinguistic distribution of the question tags *okay?* and *right?* as well as the discourse markers *you know*, *like*, *okay*, and *right* in the academic speech of women and men of various disciplines in the lecture and seminar context. During the last thirty years, linguists have demonstrated considerable differences in male and female communicative behavior, as shown in features such as interruptions, backchanneling, silence, tag questions, and hedging devices including *you know* and the discourse marker *like* (Lakoff, 1973; Dubois & Crouch, 1975; Zimmermann & West, 1975; Holmes, 1986; Tottie, 1991). However, this research has also produced many contradictory and confusing findings. Östman (1981) supports Lakoff's (1973) claim that women use *you know* more often than men do. Holmes (1986) and Erman (1992) could not identify any gender difference for the total numbers of the use of *you know*; however, they found functional differences in the use of *you know* by men and women. Concerning *like*, Dailey-O'Cain (2000) discusses the use of *like* and its perception as being typical of young women's language, although Blyth et al. (1990) showed that young men use it more frequently. Dailey-O'Cain (2000) found a similar trend, however, her data was not statistically significant. As to *okay*, Heisler (1996) found *okay* being more prevalent among men in Montreal French. In their question tag function, *okay* and *right* have been linked to powerless (O'Barr & Atkins, 1980) and to women's language, with some research finding women use more tag questions (Lakoff, 1973), fewer tag questions (Dubois & Crouch, 1975), or more tag questions of the facilitative kind, while men use more modal question tags (Holmes, 1984). Some research found no gender difference at all (Calnan & Davidson, 1998), and that the use of facilitative question tags is also tied to powerful conversational roles and not just gender (Cameron et al., 1988).

It is particularly revealing that it is frequently data collected from instructors in the academic context with its clear-cut conversational roles that indicate that women do not use more questions tags (Dubois & Crouch, 1975; Bauman, 1976), or more hedging devices (Poos & Simpson, 2002). Thus, generalizations made for gender-specific language do not seem to hold for academic discourse, which is not surprising, since academic

discourse - like most institutional discourse - is produced under very particular social constraints and restrictions, such as turn-type pre-allocation, special audience design, and the need to express and reproduce institutional contexts and the power relations of social roles (Heritage, 1988). Thus contradictory findings on the use of question tags and discourse markers in academic discourse warrant a better understanding and more refined investigation of the nature of academic speech. It is still unclear how significant differences in the sociolinguistic distribution of these structures are, under which conditions, and in connection to which social roles they occur.

In this paper, I show that not one single factor - e.g. gender or power - but rather a constellation of the following factors is responsible for the use of these structures: 1) conversational tasks in different academic disciplines, 2) gender, 3) conversational roles, 4) context (lecture and seminar), and 5) educational level. The data for this project are drawn from the MICASE corpus of academic speech compiled at the University of Michigan (Simpson et al., 2000). This project is based on 8 hours of lectures and 10 hours of seminars from an equal number of female and male instructors in the humanities and the natural sciences. This paper investigates a total of 18 instructors and about 50 students.

2. Functions

Since previous research has found that a linguistic structure can have a variety of seemingly contradictory uses (Holmes, 1984; Holmes, 1986; Cameron et al., 1988; Tannen, 1994), the functions of *okay*, *right*, *like* and *you know* must be investigated and specified in as much detail as possible. However, due to space restrictions, I only present the results of my qualitative analysis without much discussion and only specify the subfunctions I use for my quantitative analysis. The subfunctions I differentiate are categories that have been widely described in previous research, such as Dailey-O’Cain (2000) and Streeck (2002) for *like*, Erman (1992) for *you know*, and Heisler (1996) and Holmes (1984) for *okay* and *right*. The much documented category of facilitating question tags, i.e. question tags that express solidarity and encourage the addressee to respond, have been ignored in this investigation, since they were quite rare in this data set. Speakers seem to rely primarily on questions and turn-type pre-allocation to facilitate turn-taking in academic discourse. Concerning the structures under investigation, I posit and concentrate on the functions marked with an ‘x’ summarized in table 1 below:

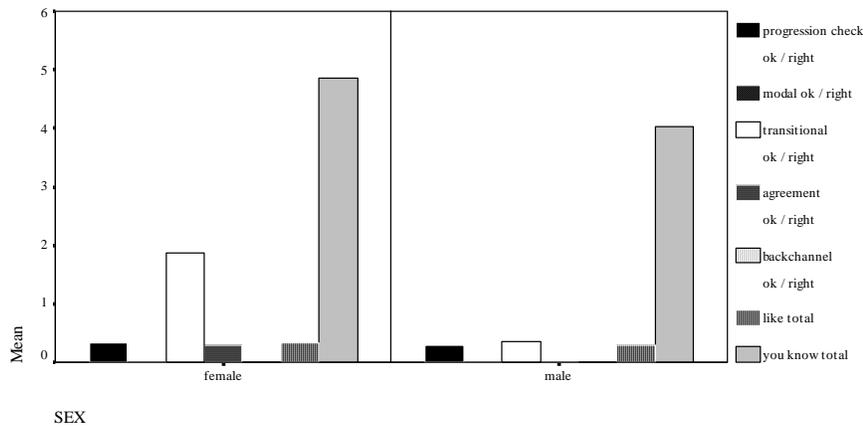
(1) Subfunctions of *okay*, *right*, *like*, and *you know*

Function	<i>ok / right</i>	<i>like</i>	<i>you know</i>
transition marker: marks information stage transitions to express discourse structure	x	x	x
modal question tag: asks for confirmation or information	x		
progression check question tag: checks whether audience is following; without necessarily expecting a verbal response	x		
backchannel signal	x		
quotative		x	
marker of information structure		x	x
hesitation / repair marker		x	x
appeal			x

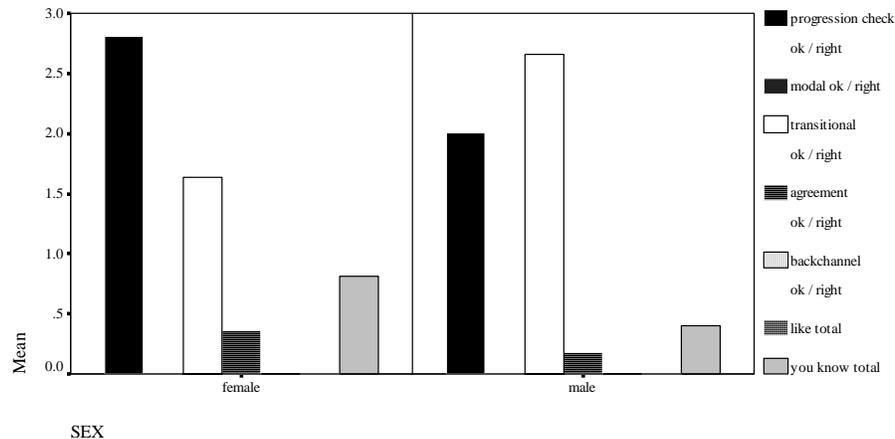
3. Sociolinguistic Distribution of *okay*, *right*, *like*, and *you know* among Instructors

I now turn to an investigation of the contexts and social roles that influence the use of *okay*, *right*, *like*, and *you know*. I start with an investigation of the language of instructors, and show that the choice of structures among instructors is sensitive to discipline and conversational role, but not to gender. I start with a discussion of gender. In spite of earlier research, which found evidence for gender-preferential language use regarding these structures, my statistical analysis using multivariate ANOVA revealed no correlation of any of the structures discussed here with gender among instructors – neither in total numbers nor in a subfunctional analysis. Since a subfunctional analysis did not yield any gender differences, I will, for the most part, conflate the total numbers of *you know* and *like* in this section. Only looking at lectures, tables 2 and 3 show average use per one thousand words, indicating that female and male instructors in humanities and natural sciences lectures use the structures under investigation in about the same amount.

(2) Gender and structures used by humanities instructors in lectures per 1000 words

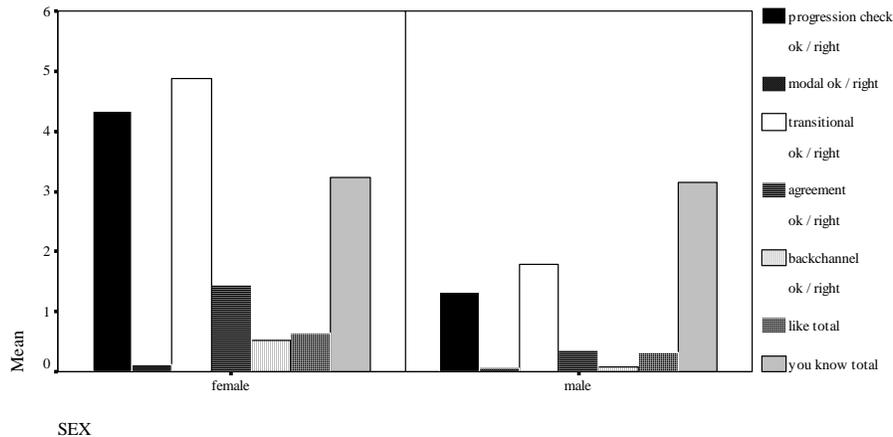


(3) Gender and structures used by natural science instructors in lectures per 1000 words



The same goes for instructors in seminars. Table 4 shows the distribution of *okay*, *right*, *like*, and *you know* in the lecture and seminar context for both sets of disciplines. While adding seminars to the data set has added certain varying trends in the gender preferential use of the structures under investigation, as the seemingly higher use of progression check and transitional *okay* and *right*, as well as the agreement and backchanneling marker by women, none of these differences are statistically significant and the use of *like* and *you know* are not part of this trend.

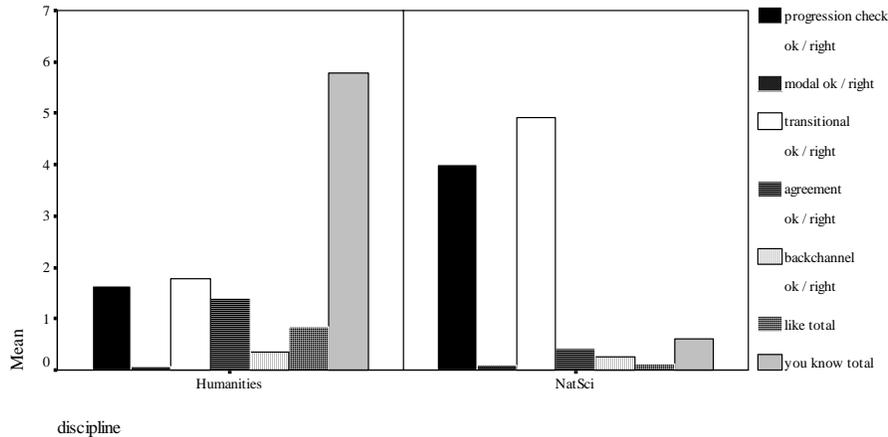
(4) Gender and structures used by instructors in lectures and seminars per 1000 words



However, while gender does not seem to be a factor influencing the use of these structures, academic discipline is, as tables 2 and 3 above indicate. Different disciplinary traditions and contents seem to influence the use of discourse markers, so that among instructors no significant gender variation is displayed, but there is instead a significant difference between humanities and natural science instructors. Generally speaking, instructors in the natural sciences use progression check question markers (such as *right?*), and transitional markers (such as *okay*) more often to structure their discourse in the lecture context, but avoid *like* and *you know*. Instructors in the humanities use a more “colloquial” style much closer to their students’ informal language, i.e. they use the discourse markers *like* and *you know* relatively frequently to structure their discourse. These trends are particularly obvious in the lecture context, where the use of progression check *okay/right* in the natural sciences and the use of *like* and *you know* in the humanities are significant at .028, .00, and .015 respectively.

While in the conflated lecture and seminar data (see table 5 below) progression check *okay* and *right* are no longer significant, *like* and *you know* are at .052 and .00. *Like* was used by all humanities instructors at least three times, but by less than half of the natural sciences instructors, so that humanists use the discourse marker *like* 7.57 times more often in lectures and seminars than natural scientists do. *You know* is used 9.65 times more often by humanities instructors than instructors in the natural sciences. I could not identify a functional difference between the two disciplines, thus the difference is a difference in degree of use, not of functional differentiation. Although progression check *okay* and *right* are no longer significant in the seminar context, the raw numbers still show obvious trends, as can be gathered from table 5 below.

(5) Discipline and structures used by instructors in lectures and seminars per 1000 words



Why are *okay* and *right* used so frequently in seminars and natural sciences lectures? Natural science instructors are of course aware that many students struggle with the often more fact-oriented subject matter as compared to the more accessible subject matter in the humanities. They therefore check on understanding more often than humanities instructors. There are of course other strategies to do that, such as asking “is that clear?”; however, there is only one occurrence of such a phrase in the humanities, but 10 in the natural sciences lectures, which bears out the point.

Why are progression check *okay* and *right* more prevalent in humanities seminars? Humanities lectures and seminars do not differ greatly in terms of subject matter. However, they differ in the presentation of the subject matter, which is interactional as opposed to monologic. In interactional discourse, it is important to check understanding as well; not just understanding of facts, but also understanding of opinions and standpoints that evolve in the discussion. This explains the much higher usage rate of progression check *okay* and *right* in humanities seminars as compared to humanities lectures. This is also borne out by a much higher use of agreement *okay* and *right* among instructors in the humanities, which is 5.27 times higher in humanities seminars than in interactional discourse in the natural sciences (see table 5), while there was no difference at all in the lecture context. Discussions in the natural sciences are not so much about agreeing or disagreeing, but about understanding, whereas in the humanities checking for agreement (*okay?*) and expressing it (*okay*) are essential points of an interactional discussion.

The difference between the humanities and the natural sciences in the use of *like* and *you know* is primarily due to different traditions of discourse and the contexts in which *like* and *you know* are used. Humanities instructors and students express more opinions, views, values, and approximations than natural scientists, who give reports, descriptions, and present factual information. The former are the contexts in which *like* and *you know* are used most frequently. *Like* and *you know* do always express a certain vagueness which derives from their original use (*like* ‘similar to, approximate’; *you know* ‘I am sure you know the kind of thing I’m talking about’) which is inappropriate in the natural sciences.

Thus I conclude my analysis with the following table characterizing the use of *okay*, *right*, *like*, and *you know* by instructors in academia.

(6) Usage of discourse markers in academia

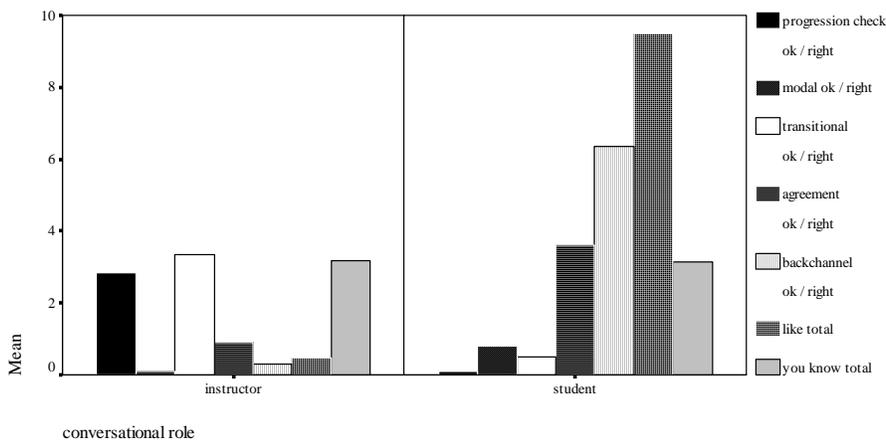
Natural Sciences	Humanities
high use of progression check <i>okay</i> and <i>right</i> (significant at .028 in lecture, 2.43 times more frequent in seminar context)	occasional use of the discourse marker <i>like</i> (significant at .00 in lectures and at .052 in lectures and seminars)
	high use of the discourse marker <i>you know</i> (significant at .015 in lectures and at .000 in lectures and seminars)

Among instructors, the factor of academic discipline or the speech tasks fulfilled in certain disciplines and contexts turned out to be most influential in the use of the discourse markers *okay*, *right*, *like*, and *you know* in lectures; the same goes for the seminar context. However here, certain non-statistically significant gender preferential tendencies could be made out, which indicates that context too plays a role in the choice of discourse markers and that a switch from monologic to interactional discourse makes a difference. In the following section, I investigate the language of students in the seminars discussed above, and I conclude that while there are certainly disciplinary differences, conversational role, gender, and education are the factors most relevant to the analysis of students' speech.

4. Sociolinguistic Distribution of *okay*, *right*, *like*, and *you know* among Students

When looking at the student data, what is most striking is how students' language is different from the language of instructors (see table 7). This is mainly due to different conversational roles, as the instructors are the presenters of information or facilitators of discussions and the students are the audience, discussants, or askers of questions.

(7) Conversational role and structures in lectures and seminars per 1000 words



With the exception of modal *okay* and *right*, as well as *you know*, this difference is statistically significant. Table 8 below summarizes the significance levels:

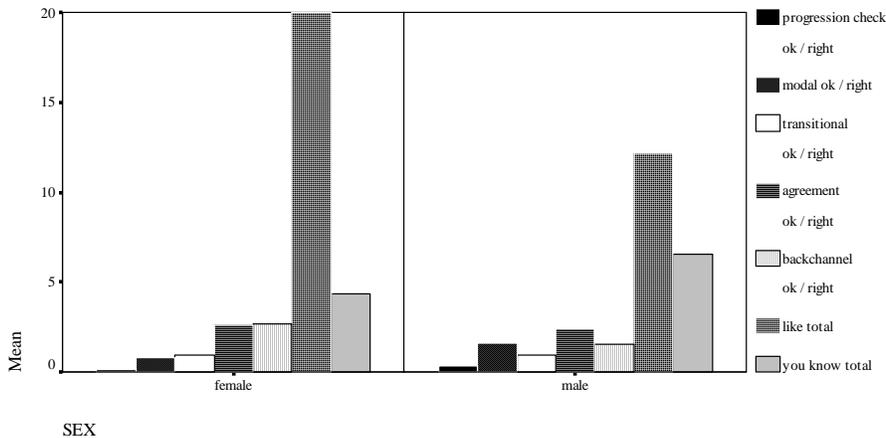
(8) Significance levels of structures used in different conversational roles

progression check <i>ok/right</i>	modal <i>ok/right</i>	transitional <i>ok/right</i>	agreement <i>ok/right</i>	backchannel <i>ok/right</i>	<i>like</i>	<i>you know</i>
.003	.107	.023	.007	.026	.003	.964

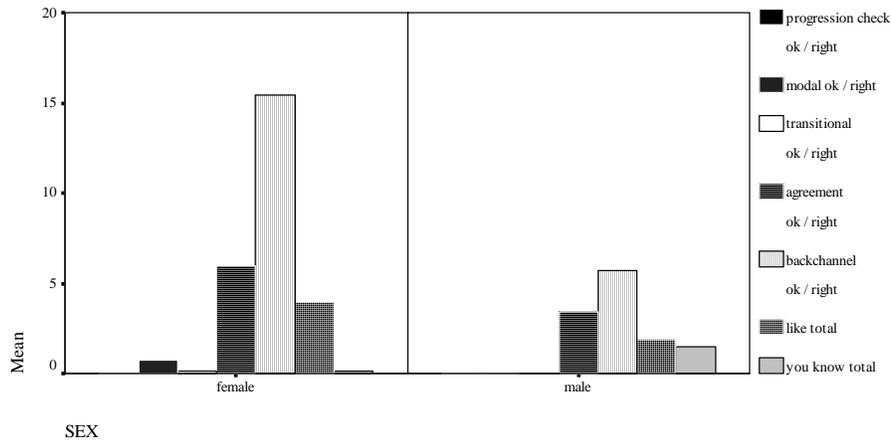
Concerning progression check and modal question tags, this resembles the findings of Cameron et al. (1988) who found that facilitative question tags are restricted to the powerful, as are progression checks in this investigation. Modal question tags are preferred by the less powerful, but are also used by individuals in powerful positions – hence the non-significance of these structures. As to *like* and *you know*, not surprisingly, *like* is used heavily by students, which is significant at .003. *You know* is used in about the same amount by students and instructors, which is important in two respects: 1. in contrast to *okay* and *right*, *you know* does not seem to be tied to conversational role, and 2. since *like* and *you know* have very similar functions, and could in principle be used by students as well as instructors, these results suggest that *like* is avoided or has never been acquired by instructors due to its stylistic connotations and stigmatization.

The variation by discipline I showed for instructors finds its reflection among students in the case of *you know* and *like*. *Like* is used 5.5 times more frequently in the humanities than in the natural sciences. This is statistically significant at .009. *You know* is used 6.8 times more frequently in the humanities than in the natural sciences, which is significant at .003. Apart from variation by discipline and conversational role, there is some gender variation in the use of *okay*, *right*, *like*, and *you know*. While there were no trends in lectures, and only slight gender trends in seminars among instructors, there are distinct tendencies among students; however, none of these trends are statistically significant. Furthermore, gender and discipline variation interact, so that there are different trends for gender-preferential language in the humanities and the natural sciences, which makes it evident that a sociolinguistic comparison in academia that only looks at gender is destined to produce inaccurate or confusing results. Tables 9 and 10 indicate the varying gender trends in the humanities and natural sciences.

(9) Gender and structures used by humanities students per 1000 words



(10) Gender and structures used by natural sciences students per 1000 words



Tables 9 and 10 indicate that female natural sciences students use more *okays* and *rights* to express agreement and backchanneling. In this data set, it is not just females, but female students in the natural sciences who use these structures more often to keep the conversation going and express interpersonal relations. Female humanities students stand out through their use of the discourse marker *like*. On the other hand, male students use the discourse marker *you know* more often than female students in both disciplines. However, what tables 9 and 10 do not reveal, is that this gender-preferential use of *you know* among students is linked to educational level, since there is a difference in the use of *you know* among undergraduates and graduate students. *You know* is most widespread among male graduate students who use it 2.77 times more frequently than female graduate students do. There is hardly any difference in the use of *you know* between male and female undergraduates. Concerning *like*, it is in particular female undergraduate students in the humanities who use *like* as a discourse marker; however, in the natural sciences, females also use *like* more frequently than males. Although female graduate students use the discourse marker *like* more often than their male counterparts, this is only a slightly higher usage and comparatively small in relation to undergraduate speech, in which females use *like* about twice as often as males do.

It is furthermore enlightening that *like* is generally more widespread among undergraduates, who use it about twice as much as graduate students, whereas *you know* is more widespread among graduate students, who use it twice as much as undergraduate students. This reversal in frequency of usage indicates that graduate students avoid using the discourse marker *like* or never really acquired it, probably because of its stigmatization. Graduate students use *you know* instead. Although, due to the unpredictability of these discourse markers, it is impossible to document that undergraduates use *like* where graduate students use *you know*, the statistical trends nevertheless suggest an interpretation along these lines. The functional analysis shows that it is particularly the use of *like* as a quotative that is less frequent at the graduate level – which might be due to a higher stigmatization of this function of *like*, since its use as a quotative is the most recent stage in the evolution of this discourse marker (Streeck, 2002: 589), and might therefore be the least accepted function of *like*.

5. Conclusions

This paper set out to investigate the contexts and social roles in academic discourse that influence the use and sociolinguistic distribution of *okay*, *right*, *like*, and *you know* and hoped to determine how influential the speakers' gender is in determining frequency of use. I have to conclude that of all the factors investigated in this paper, *okay*, *right*, *like*, and *you know* correlate least with gender. Even the statistically insignificant gender variation that could be detected seems to be heavily dependent on context (lectures versus seminars), conversational role, and educational level, which makes sense, since people are not just male or female, but members of several social categories. Only for conversational role and discipline could statistically significant differences be detected. However, both of these categories are stylistically and contextually motivated and not primarily socially motivated like gender, education or age. The use of structures by instructors is most sensitive to discipline, conversational role, and the associated power dimension. Students' use of *okay*, *right*, *like*, and *you know* is influenced by their less powerful conversational role and discipline, but also educational level and gender. The more obvious gender trend among students might be due to peer group socialization. For undergraduates at American universities, the gender peer group is still more important than the discipline peer group, especially since at the undergraduate stage multi-disciplinary contacts are the norm. For instructors, the peers of their own discipline are an important focus, and gender lines are of relatively little importance in the context of the discipline.

In conclusion, it seems that academic discourse is produced under particular social constraints that make students and instructors alter their linguistic behavior depending on discipline, context, and conversational role. This paper provides important insights into the contextual constraints that govern the use of discourse markers and question tags and explains confusing findings regarding their variation by gender. The attempt to link these structures to gender produced contradictory results, since data elicited in the academic context is also subject to variation by discipline, context, and conversational role. Future research on gender-preferential language will therefore have to keep the contextual constraints of *okay*, *right*, *like*, and *you know* in mind and design research projects accordingly.

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