"This seems somewhat counterintuitive, though…"

Negative evaluation in linguistic book reviews by male and female authors

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This study, using a corpus of book reviews in linguistics, considers the ways in which academic book reviewers make negative evaluations, and in particular it examines whether there are systematic differences between male and female reviewers. The paper focuses on their use of adjectives such as *surprising* and *disappointing*, and concludes that our stereotypes of language and gender relations are not entirely reliable.

Introduction: Book reviews, evaluation, and gender

In an introductory article on evaluation in text, Thompson and Hunston describe "the expression of the writer's or speaker's opinion" as "an important feature of language" (2000: 2). What they say about language in general is true in particular for a special type of language: the language of book reviews. In book reviews, a genre that so far has been rather neglected in the study of academic writing (cf. for instance Motta-Roth 1996: 99; Hyland 2000: 43), the expression of opinions is a central feature. Authors of reviews provide the research community with valuable information about new publications in their area of study and thus help us choose from the wide range of books available those books which we might most profit from. Reviewers do this by commenting on the book and by telling potential readers what they think about it.

    In the guidelines for submitting reviews for Linguist List issues, prospective reviewers are explicitly asked to "point out merits and defects, identify problems, ask questions, and present positive or negative implications of the analy-

sis", in addition to summarising the book's contents (Linguist List 2003:2). In an article entitled 'Reviewing books for scholarly journals', Erwin states something very similar to this when he claims that "[t]he two components that epitomize a traditional book review are a summary of the book's content and an evaluative commentary" (1992:113). Hyland even puts the expression of opinions at the heart of any text of this academic genre by saying that "reviews are centrally evaluative" (2000:41). The present paper focuses on evaluation, or, more precisely, on negative evaluation in book reviews, and looks at ways in which review authors refer to defects, problems, or weaknesses of the work under scrutiny.

My main interest lies in the expression of *negative* evaluation (e.g. *this position is somewhat confusing*, attested example) as it seems to be more problematic to find an appropriate way to comment negatively on a book than to praise its positive features. Reviewers, including myself, may often find it difficult to express criticism of other researchers' works in a polite way, face-saving in the sense of Brown and Levinson (1987), both for the reviewer and for the author of the book. One part of the analysis will therefore discuss the use of downtoning devices or so-called hedges (e.g. the adverbial *somewhat* in the above example) as a means of reducing the impoliteness or face-threat of a critical comment.

In addition to this pragmatic part of the analysis, I will also include a sociolinguistic dimension and look at reviews produced by female authors separately from those produced by male authors to see whether women and men evaluate differently, without assuming beforehand that they do. While a number of sociolinguistic studies deal with the distribution of features in the spoken discourse of women and/or men (e.g. Coates 1996; Tannen 1990), we know little about the language and gender relation in written texts (but see Meinhof 1997). Besides, a large number of the analyses of spoken language and gender are either based on intuitive subjective data or on small samples of authentic material collected from conversations in specific contexts (e.g. Cameron 1997; Lakoff 1975). There is, hence, certainly a need for larger-scale empirical investigations on the relationship between language and gender in spoken and, in particular, in written English. The present study can be regarded as a first step in this direction, in that it uses authentic non-intuitive corpus data to investigate an important part of the written academic discourse of men and women.

The empirical study: Exploring BRILC

The starting point for the empirical analysis of negative evaluative expressions in male and female writing is an explorative approach to a corpus of linguistic book reviews. Before I report on the actual corpus-analytic procedure and present the central findings of the investigation, I will give a brief outline of the corpus and describe its most important features.

The Book Reviews In Linguistics Corpus (BRILC): Design and compilation

The Book Reviews In Linguistics Corpus (BRILC) was specifically compiled for the present study. It is an electronic collection of English language reviews published on the internet in issues of the Linguist List, an online mailing list and forum for exchanging information on the study of language and languages. BRILC is designed as an open-ended monitor corpus which does not have a fixed size but to which new texts are added periodically. The research reported on in this article is based on a 500,000-word corpus (size in February 2003), consisting of 222 book reviews, 111 written by female and 111 by male authors.

All texts in the corpus are kept in plain text file format, and so far no meta-linguistic annotational material (like word class labels or paragraph markers) has been added. In the compilation of BRILC I decided to include full texts instead of text samples because it seemed likely that evaluative expressions were not evenly distributed across each review (cf. also Motta-Roth's 1996 findings). Hence, text sampling may have meant skewing the data and probably also the results of the analysis.[1] However, some minor textual editing was carried out: review headers (including date of publication, email address and affiliation of the author), footnotes, and references were cut and any kind of information about the reviewer (name, affiliation, research interest) was deleted. In connection with this editing process the text files were sorted into two subfolders: "BRILC texts written by female authors (BRILC female)" and "BRILC texts written by male authors (BRILC male)". The resulting internal structure of BRILC thus allows corpus searches by reviewer gender.

Tracing negative evaluative expressions in BRILC

Following Thompson and Hunston's general definition of evaluation (2000:5), I regard negative evaluation in book reviews as a cover term for the reviewer's expression of a negative attitude towards, a negative viewpoint on, or negative

feelings about the book under review. What I did to trace negative evalua-
tive expressions in BRILC was take a corpus-driven approach to the topic of
negative evaluation, i.e. a let-the-data-guide-you approach without any pre-
formulated ideas or fixed categories in mind (for a detailed account of the
corpus-driven approach see Tognini Bonelli 2001). In this context the centrality
of any kind of corpus work in the examination of evaluative devices in language
ought to be stressed. I would like to join Joanna Channell in her argument and
show that "analysis of evaluation can be removed from the chancy and un-
reliable business of linguistic intuitions and based in systematic observation
of naturally occurring data" as it "allows observations which go beyond what
intuitions can achieve" (2000: 39).

I started my investigations from the corpus data. First of all I ran a BRILC
query on the search term *book* to see how the noun is pre- or postmodified and
what kinds of comments are usually made about "the book". Of course, not all
instances of *book* referred to the work under review. Thus, a careful manual
sorting of the concordance lines was necessary. In a second step I read through
ten of the 222 files included in the corpus, five written by male and five by fe-
male reviewers. By carrying out these two initial analytic steps, I found different
types of lexically based negative criticism which can be grouped according to
word classes:

1. nominal criticism, e.g. *problems, shortcomings, weaknesses, the absence of X*
2. verbal criticism, e.g. the book + *does not X, would have benefited from X,
   suffers from X, seems to lack X, might hinder readers from X, could have been
   made more readable*
3. adverbial criticism, e.g. *abruptly, unnecessarily*; a positive comment + a
   concessive adverb (*however, though*)
4. adjectival criticism, e.g. *clear* + negation, *confusing, unclear, vague.*

This last type of criticism seemed on the one hand to provide a greater lexi-
cal variety than types 1 and 3 (nominal and adverbial criticism), while on the
other hand being easier to trace and handle than the rather complex verbal
constructions I found (type 2). This was especially so when studying an unan-
notated plain text corpus. I therefore decided to look at adjectival criticism in
some more detail and centre all further analytic steps on negative evaluative
adjectives.

The next task was then to find a larger number of critical adjectives in
BRILC. While determining a local grammar of evaluation in text, Hunston and
Sinclair found that language "patterns may be used to identify evaluative ad-
jectives" (2000: 91). A pattern that was noticeable in the reviews I read involved

N	Concordance
18	ther sections, for instance 5.5, remain somewhat opaque because formal con
19	cated and theoretically informed, albeit somewhat out of date, analysis.
20	d yet, the essay devoted to his work is somewhat outdated: It deals extensivel
21	oundary between lexicon and syntax is somewhat porous, since some linguisti
22	personality Thoughts of Edward Sapir, somewhat puzzling in nature, are pres
23	ur through eight. This makes the book somewhat repetitive in the presentatio
24	e, and a single interview and therefore somewhat skewed. Although the excer
25	thors' treatment of these two topics is somewhat superficial because they did
26	ker." This is a rather vague statement, somewhat surprising for a work which i
27	r analyses of specific speech acts. It is somewhat surprising to see more tha
28	he phenomenon of "speech acts". It is somewhat surprising that only 21 page
29	approaches to demonstratives. This is somewhat surprising, given the importa
30	nd the answer given is both vague and somewhat unclear (pp. 5-6). The disc
31	formance be characterized. It remains somewhat unclear, if the speakers of
32	int" in "ne ... pas" construction) is also somewhat unexpected. The authors
33	strands of research, however, is Bell's somewhat vague proposal (p. 168) of
34	from all three sites the presenter was somewhat wooden and failed to achie

Figure 1. Part of a BRILC concordance of *somewhat*, sorted to the right (1R, 2R)

the co-occurrence of negative evaluative adjectives with either a form of the verb SEEM or a premodifying adverb, like *somewhat*, *rather*, or *quite*, which has a softening or downtoning effect. This pattern (downtoning adverb or form of SEEM + negative evaluative adjective) was hence used as a means of adjective identification. I compiled and examined BRILC concordances of *quite*, *rather*, *somewhat*, and *seem**, including the forms *seem*, *seemed*, *seemingly*, *seems* (see Figure 1 for a concordance of the downtoner *somewhat*), the result of which was a list of 70 critical adjectives that occurred as collocates of one or several of these search items.[2] The automatic compilation and sorting, and the manual filtering of concordances of each of these 70 adjectives led to the results reported on in the following sections.

Focussing on negative evaluative adjectives: Adjectival criticism and the value system of linguists

As Knowles (1989) states in his study on the "suasive nature" of the language in tourist brochures, there is a close connection between evaluation in a text and the ideology of the group of people the text is aimed at. Evaluative expressions usually mirror ideological features of a social group or discourse community and need "to be discussed in terms of the value system of the community" (Hunston 1993: 71). A similar statement is made by Bolívar, who observes that

"evaluation is more than expressing feelings and opinions, it concerns attitudes and value systems" (2001:135). Thus, when we look at features of evaluation in book reviews written by linguists, we automatically get an insight into the value system of the linguistic community, which can be regarded as a community of practice, "an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavour" (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1992b:434; also in Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1992a).

According to Hyland, the construction of knowledge takes place inside particular communities of practice which "exist in virtue of a shared set of assumptions and routines about how collectively to deal with and represent their experiences" (1999:121). I will be trying to show that corpus research on the use of negative evaluative adjectives in texts written by and for linguists can provide us with information about the shared assumptions and the central norms of the linguistic community. For this purpose, BRILC concordances of the 70 adjectives traced by the preceding analytic steps were compiled and filtered manually. This manual filtering process was necessary to make sure that only such occurrences of the adjectives were included in which a critical comment was made on the book under review, and not on other sources like texts or theories the book referred to. Figure 2 shows an example of such a filtered concordance.

The result of the concordancing, filtering, and counting process was a frequency list of critical adjectives. The following are the top 20 items in this list

N	Concordance
1	phs on the concept of reanalysis with a confusing, obscure example of the Sw
2	ally odd. The general exposition is also confusing. Key terms and concepts-"s
3	iption of their test designs and avoiding confusing or superfluous tables and st
4	represent, a feature I found to be a bit confusing. Table 2.1 (p. 12) is the first
5	ining language that the translator finds confusing). He also speaks on a very p
6	eaning or function. What is furthermore confusing is that the author uses the t
7	e wide definition and use of diglossia is confusing and misleading. The meaning
8	enig (1996),but a mixed perspective is confusing. Of course this confusion ha
9	phor: A Practical Introduction" is a little confusing -- it would be better to add t
10	formulaicity (p.39). I think this is a little confusing because liaison might be us
11	e organization of this edition may prove confusing. Few works are presented
12	s one chapter that I initially found quite confusing, but in retrospect, I suspect i
13	clause elements turns out to be slightly confusing and - in my view - less plaus
14	ften given only minimal (andsometimes confusing) definitions and examples, w
15	nation of some examples is sometimes confusing. The discussion related to a
16	or. However, this position is somewhat confusing, given that dialect writing co

Figure 2. BRILC concordance of *confusing*, filtered and sorted to the left (1L, 2L)

(with absolute frequencies of occurrence in BRILC behind each adjective in brackets):

1. *clear* + negation (40)	11. *convincing* + negation (7)
2. *confusing* (16)	12. *narrow* (7)
3. *unclear* (16)	13. *mysterious* (6)
4. *difficult* (15)	14. *odd* (6)
5. *vague* (15)	15. *awkward* (5)
6. *unfortunate* (14)	16. *disappointing* (5)
7. *lengthy* (12)[3]	17. *obscure* (5)
8. *surprising* (10)	18. *puzzling* (5)
9. *hard to* + verb (9)	19. *superficial* (5)
10. *misleading* (8)	20. *circular* (4)

This frequency ranking can certainly provide us with some interesting information about the value system of the linguistic community. The list can teach us something about the requirements for good academic writing and about the ideology behind it in that it shows which characteristics of a book are usually criticised by reviewers. It is probably a clever move to first find out what is considered a bad feature of linguistic writing and is hence to be avoided, if the aim is to write a book that meets the norms for a good piece of linguistic writing. Judging from the negative evaluative adjectives frequently used in BRILC texts, linguists[4] value highly clarity in writing, as the token numbers of *clear* + negation, *confusing*, *unclear*, and *misleading* show. Other features that determine the quality of a good book are brevity or the avoidance of redundant information (≠ *lengthy*), information which is to the point (≠ *vague*), coherence and logical connections (≠ *surprising*), convincing argumentation (≠ *convincing* + negation), development of thoughts (≠ *circular*), thoroughness (≠ *superficial*), and what I would term 'easy informational access' (≠ *difficult*, *obscure*).

A data-guided approach to evaluation in book reviews thus tells us something about ideology in linguistics and reveals, to use Motta-Roth's words, "what is considered to be desirable or undesirable, important or unimportant in the intellectual apparatus of the field" (1996: 115).

In the next part of the paper, I will investigate whether, within the community of linguists, male and female members of the group emphasise different values or favour different critical adjectives in assessing the quality of a book.

Adjectival criticism and reviewer gender

In this section I shall address the question "Do women and men, in the context of linguistic review writing, criticise differently?" It has to be stressed again that this question clearly differs from traditional questions on language and gender in that it does not presuppose that there *are* in fact differences between the use of criticism by male and female reviewers. We have to be aware of the dangers which lie in approaching language data with preconceived ideas and certain expectations about the findings in mind, because the outcome of the research is likely to be influenced by these initial expectations and by the type of questions asked. We should thus take Bing and Bergvall seriously when they state that

> Linguists must realize that when they publish answers to the question, 'How do women and men speak differently?', their discoveries of difference may be co-opted for the purpose of strengthening gender polarization.   (1996: 18)

To facilitate the comparison of the ways in which female and male linguists use negative evaluation, each of the 70 manually filtered concordances of critical adjectives was automatically sorted according to reviewer gender. Figure 3 shows such a gender-sorted concordance of the search word *lengthy*.

As can be seen in Figure 3, equal shares of concordance lines (6/6) come from texts written by women and men respectively. Although this is not the case for all adjectives under investigation, this result mirrors the general findings of the gender-related part of the present analysis. Of 297 instances (tokens) of critical adjectives in BRILC, going back to the list of the 70 different search items (types), 147 entries (49.5%) are from the male reviewers subcorpus and

N	Concordance	
1	into the papers that follow, and a lengthy list of references. Their o	female~
2	only in the second quarter of her lengthy exposition that those intere	female~
3	the personal anecdotes are quite lengthy and sometimes distracting	female~
4	d Results by Gergely Petho This lengthy paper synthesizes the rese	female~
5	e teaching (pp. 14-46) This fairly lengthy chapter shows corpus lingu	female~
6	in the text. The excerpts are quite lengthy (1-2 pages) and contain e	female~
7	ranslation rather than attempting a lengthy novel. Landers also sugge	malere~
8	cessing This chapter consists of a lengthy discussion of language pro	malere~
9	harts and tables, a glossary and a lengthy list of references. The incl	malere~
10	ateral liquids are accorded a more lengthy explanation in Ch. 19, incl	malere~
11	particularly informative. There is a lengthy list of references, including	malere~
12	inguistics" (pp. 3-81) constitutes a lengthy discussion of the external	malere~

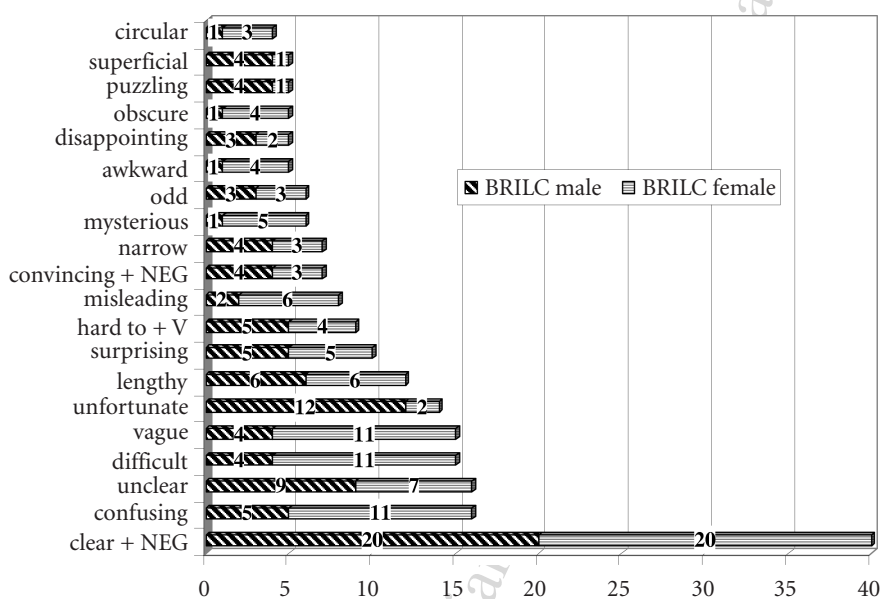**Figure 3.** BRILC concordance of *lengthy*, sorted according to reviewer gender

Figure 4. Gender-differentiated distribution of the 20 most frequent critical adjectives in BRILC

150 (50.5%) from the female reviewers section. There are thus no significant gender-related differences with respect to overall token frequencies. In the case of the distribution of types, the difference between the female and male sub-corpora is slightly bigger but still not statistically significant (according to the chi-square statistical test). Of the 70 adjectives under analysis, 54 occur in male-authored reviews whereas a smaller set of 46 adjectives is used by female authors. More significant differences can be found when we look more closely at the distribution of individual adjectives across texts in the two components of BRILC. Figure 4 graphically displays the frequencies of occurrence of the 20 most often used critical adjectives in BRILC male and BRILC female.

As we can see, some of the adjectives (e.g. *unfortunate*, *puzzling*) occur more frequently in male-authored reviews, while others (e.g. *difficult*, *misleading*) are preferred by female review writers. However, a comparison of the top six frequency lists of negative evaluative adjectives in BRILC female and BRILC male reveals similarities rather than discrepancies (cf. Table 1). Four of these higher frequency adjectives (*clear* + negation, *confusing*, *lengthy*, *unclear*) appear in both lists, whereas only two of the items in the male list (*unfortunate*, *hard to* + verb) and in the female list (*difficult*, *vague*) are found in positions

Table 1. Most frequently used negative evaluative adjectives in the BRILC subcorpora (absolute frequencies of occurrence in brackets)

BRILC male	BRILC female
1. *clear* + negation (20)	1. *clear* + negation (20)
2. *unfortunate* (12)	2. *confusing* (11)
3. *unclear* (9)	3. *difficult* (11)
4. *lengthy* (6)	4. *vague* (11)
5. *confusing* (5)	5. *unclear* (7)
6. *hard to* + verb (5)	6. *lengthy* (6)

of lower rank in the female and male charts respectively. Also, a look at a few selected adjectives shows that what we are tempted to deduce from Figure 4 concerning gender differences may be misleading. Four of the 11 instances of *vague* in BRILC female, for example, occur in the same review. This indicates that the preferences of individual authors for certain adjectives must not be neglected and that there may well be at least as much *intra*-gender variation (i.e. variation within the male or female sex group) as there is *inter*-gender variation.[5] Certainly, a larger collection of texts is needed for the retrieval of higher absolute token numbers if more reliable statements on qualitative adjective specific differences between negative evaluation strategies of male and female reviewers are to be made. However, even then we cannot be entirely sure whether differences really arise from the preferences of women and men (as members of two gender groups) or rather from the preferences of individual reviewers.

Hedged adjectival criticism and reviewer gender

One of the definitions under the entry "hedge (verb)" in the Cobuild English Dictionary says that "[i]f you **hedge**, you avoid [. . .] committing yourself to a particular action or decision" (Sinclair et al. 1995: 784). The idea of 'avoiding commitment' is also central to the concept of hedging in linguistics (cf. e.g. Hyland 1999: 103).[6] By refusing to fully commit themselves to what they write, e.g. by using *seems* instead of *is* in the sentence *This seems quite anachronistic for a book published in 2000* (BRILC), writers make their statements appear less forceful, convey indeterminacy or vagueness, and put themselves in a detached position. In this context, Hyland (1998: 1) lists "the kind of caveats like *I think*, *perhaps*, *might* and *maybe*" as hedging devices and stresses their expression of tentativeness or softening which goes hand in hand with a reduction of the speaker/writer commitment. As "the review is a potentially threatening genre"

N	Concordance
1	constructions" and "contexts", and it is surprising that this question has not be
2	y attempt to make it an 'Irish joke'. It is surprising to me that it was related in
3	f our participants" (p.7). This is a little surprising, as one would expect that e-
4	ir insistence on this point is particularly surprising given that the preceding pap
5	E, SUCCEED, TOGETHER may seem surprising at a first glance, but the auth
6	is a rather vague statement, somewhat surprising for a work which is otherwis
7	s to demonstratives. This is somewhat surprising, given the important role play
8	enon of "speech acts". It is somewhat surprising that only 21 pages are devot
9	of specific speech acts. It is somewhat surprising to see more than 340 pages
10	f grammaticalization, and it is therefore surprising that the term grammaticalizat
11	on different multilingual corpora, it was surprising that practically all the article

Figure 5. BRILC concordance of *surprising*, including hedged and un-hedged examples

(Hyland 2000: 56) and as criticism inevitably creates a certain amount of tension, hedges are needed as a means of softening this tension and weakening the threat of the criticism, hence minimising the risk of loss of face, and at the same time making the utterance more polite.[7] Politeness can thus be regarded as the main motivating factor for the use of hedging. Figure 5 illustrates how *somewhat*, *may seem*, *to me*, and *a little* are used as hedges in some of the reviews to soften the force of the critical adjective *surprising*.

It is a common belief that in general women are more polite than men and that female language contains more hedges than male language (see for instance Holmes 1995). For the present analysis this would mean that the percentages of hedged negative evaluative statements should be significantly higher in BRILC female than in BRILC male. However, if we determine the shares of hedging in the subcorpora of BRILC, we do not find any significant differences between the numbers of [hedge + negative adjective] combinations in reviews written by women and men but almost equal percentages. In BRILC female, hedging devices (like *rather*, *somewhat*, *it seems*, *I think*) were found in 83 of 150 examined concordance lines (55.3%). With 53.7% (79 out of 147 instances) the relative number of hedged critical statements in texts written by male reviewers is only slightly lower. Thus, concerning the shares of hedging of all analysed adjectives as a group, no significant gender-related differences could be found.

A look at the adjectives whose shares of hedging lie far above average (i.e. above 53.7% or 55.3%) reveals similarities as well as differences between BRILC female and BRILC male (cf. Table 2). Apparently, reviewers in both gender groups feel a need to hedge their statements when they use [*convincing* + negation] or [*clear* + negation]. While male reviewers show particularly high shares

Table 2. Adjectives showing particularly high shares of hedging in reviews by male and female authors

BRILC male	BRILC female
convincing + negation: 100% (4 in 4)	*convincing* + negation: 100% (3 in 3)
misleading: 100% (2 in 2)	*disappointing*: 100% (2 in 2)
confusing: 80% (4 in 5)	*unfortunate*: 100% (2 in 2)
surprising: 80% (4 in 5)	*awkward*: 75% (3 in 4)
clear + negation: 75% (15 in 20)	*clear* + negation: 75% (15 in 20)

of hedging with *misleading*, *confusing*, and *surprising*, female authors score above average for the percentages of softened utterances e.g. with *disappointing*, *unfortunate*, and *awkward*. However, it has to be noted that, because of the very small absolute numbers of [adjective + hedge] occurrences in BRILC male and BRILC female (cf. Table 2), the results have to be treated with extreme caution and must not be overrated. Generalisations about the hedging preferences of women and men on the basis of these findings are hence rather problematic. Besides, as was the case with adjectival criticism in general, it is likely that results on hedged adjectival criticism which hint at inter-gender differences in fact refer back to possibly gender-independent preferences of individual review authors. These findings support Poos and Simpson's observation, based on a subsection of the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MICASE), that "there is no significant gender-related effect on speakers' hedging frequencies" (2002: 20).[8]

Theoretical implications: Rethinking language and gender relations

According to the results of the present analysis, there are no significant differences between female and male writers concerning their use of adjectival criticism in linguistic book reviews.[9] Traditional assumptions that in general women are less critical than men and that there is more mitigation and less aggravation in female than in male language can not be supported. While our empirical analysis showed remarkable similarities between the groups of male and female reviewers, it pointed to some dissimilarities among the members of these apparently homogeneous groups. In other words, the reader's attention was directed to "intragroup differences and intergroup similarities [which] often go unreported" in the literature (Bing & Bergvall 1996: 13). Our findings thus imply the necessity of rethinking traditional beliefs about the relations between language and gender.

Previous sociolinguistic findings related to gender contrasts and politeness phenomena in conversational interaction do not seem to be valid in the context of academic (or at least review) writing. Often language divergences which are ascribed to gender may depend on other factors like aims of the discourse, power relations, or the context of the actual speech or writing situation. As has been hinted at in recent sociolinguistic studies, we probably have to include "the perceived norms of the CofP [community of practice]" in our analyses of language and gender (Mills 2002:84). Depending on which community of practice we belong to in a certain situation and depending on who we want to be in that situation, we perform differently in different contexts. When I sit down to write a book review, I do not perform as the university teacher, the sister, friend, or running companion (all of which identities I have in other life situations), but as the critical academic who participates in the linguistic community and tries to evaluate another community member's writings. In such a specific situation gender may be a less influential factor on the language I use and on the lexical choices I make than writing task and community membership are.

Freed, whose empirical study on discourse features also revealed striking gender similarities concerning language behaviour, found that often "speech patterns are products of the activities that people are engaged in" (1996:67). What she states about spoken language probably holds true also for written discourse. The present analysis has demonstrated that certain language patterns, e.g. the pattern [downtoning adverb + critical adjective] as in *somewhat surprising*, are repeatedly used in negative evaluative statements by men and women alike. Hence, gender appears to be a less relevant variable than task or activity (in this case the activity of review writing and the task of commenting on somebody else's book). I therefore agree with Freed when she says that we

> should hesitate before attributing to sex or gender linguistic differences which can more accurately be accounted for by economic privilege, subcultural phenomena, setting, activity, audience, personality, or by *the context-specific communicative goals of the particular speakers* who are being studied.
>
> (1996:56; my emphasis)

These observations support a recent trend in gender studies which stresses gender dynamicity and challenges the clear-cut male-female dichotomy (cf. the contributions in Bergvall et al. 1996 and in Litosseliti & Sunderland 2002; also cf. Butler 1999). If it is true that we perform differently in different situations and constantly switch between different context-dependent identities, it may well be that these identities, rather than falling into two gender classes, are

situated somewhere on a scale going from "stereotypically male" to "stereo-typically female". As is often the case with dichotomies, these two classes are abstractions and not ideal to capture reality. A continuum, perhaps with pro-totypes, may serve better to explain empirical real-life findings than a binary system does.

This trend towards continuity and dynamicity goes hand in hand with a welcome shift from focussing on dissimilarities to looking at (and for) simi-larities between the language of women and men. We need to be aware of the fact that as long as we approach the data with preconceived ideas about dif-ferences between male and female language in mind, it will be difficult to find out more about the real origins of linguistic variation and about the ways in which language is really used in spoken and written discourse. For the present analysis this means that new observations about negative evaluation strategies in academic writing by women and men probably would not have been made if our research question had been "*How* do male and female review authors criticise differently?" Instead, the data were approached with the question "*Do* male and female review authors criticise differently?"

Conclusion: The need for corpus-driven sociolinguistics

The present empirical analysis was intended to shed light on the expression of negative evaluation in linguistic book reviews and to see whether male and female reviewers differ considerably in their use of critical adjectives and politeness-conveying hedging devices. I hope to have shown (a) that corpus-driven investigations of the language of a certain academic discourse genre (here linguistic book reviews) can reveal interesting facts about the value sys-tem of the discourse community (here the community of linguists), (b) that they can lead to unexpected findings concerning the use of criticism and hedged criticism in reviews written by men and women, and (c) that these findings might challenge existing conceptions about language and gender rela-tions. We obviously need to be more cautious with over-generalisations about and stereotyped interpretations of these relations.

Some of the results presented above, especially those related to similari-ties in the language of female and male authors, may indeed seem "somewhat counterintuitive" to the reader. They demonstrate rather nicely, though, one of the major strengths of corpus research: to enable us to discover things about the language that remain hidden to our intuition.[10] However, it cannot be taken for granted at this stage that the results obtained are fully representative of re-

view language and of male and female review writing in general, as the data sets which my investigations are based on may not be large enough. Two future tasks will therefore be (1) an expansion of BRILC (from 500,000 to several million words) and (2) a comparison of the data collected from this corpus with data from other (linguistic) review corpora.

It has to be stressed that the present study could not do much more than scratch the surface of a wide newly emerging research field, a field which I would like to call 'corpus-driven sociolinguistics'. In the future, a lot of research in this area will be necessary in order to provide a larger empirical basis for the study of language and society. I suspect that if researchers take large amounts of data seriously and approach them in an unprejudiced way, i.e. without certain preconceived ideas, concrete expectations or biased questions in mind, exciting new discoveries about the factors that influence our linguistic behaviour will be made. As long as we go on asking traditional questions and start with theories instead of data, we will find what we want to find and not what is actually there to be found.[11] My suggestion would hence be that we ask different questions, base our research on more data, and let the data guide us to discover facts hidden so far and maybe even to make some revolutionary findings about the language. More corpus-driven comparative analyses of the writing of men and women in different settings and in different written registers will probably further challenge the oversimplified male-female dichotomy and lead to a more contextualised, more complex, and less binary approach to gender studies (or variation studies in general) in linguistics.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. For a discussion on sampling and the advantages and drawbacks of sample corpora see Sinclair (1991: 19 and 23f.).

2. For more information on *somewhat*, its unfavourable contexts and negative connotations, the reader is referred to Bublitz (1996).

3. In the case of *lengthy* I was not absolutely sure whether the adjective really expressed negative evaluation (most dictionaries give rather neutral definitions). Hence, before *lengthy* was put on the critical adjective list, two large reference corpora of written British English, the written part of the British National Corpus (BNC, 90 million words) and the online searchable British English part of the Bank of English (BoE, 26 million words; accessible via http://www.collins.co.uk/Corpus/CorpusSearch.aspx consulted: 05.05.05), were consulted to see how the adjective is used in context. The BNC and BoE concordances demonstrated that *lengthy* often appears in negative contexts and repeatedly co-occurs with nouns like *ban*, *battle*, *debate*, *jail sentence*, *torture*, *war* and *warning*. The same procedure (with comparable results) was carried out for *surprising*.

4. The use of the collective term "linguists" is not supposed to give the impression that each member of this group treasures exactly the same values to the same degree. However, despite some intra-group variation, agreement can probably be found concerning most of the values.

5. Another possible variation factor in this context might be a regional or ethnic one. Unfortunately, though, the originally intended subdivision (in the compilation of BRILC) of text files according to the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the review authors could not be carried out, as in most cases it was impossible to determine whether the writers were native speakers of English and which regional variety of English they were using. Besides, it is likely that Linguist List editors make minor alterations on the reviews and do not fully preserve the original style.

6. The use of the term goes back to Lakoff (1972) for whom "hedges" were devices like *rather*, *very*, or *sort of* that can make an utterance fuzzier or less fuzzy. Since then the concept has been widened and defined differently by discourse analysts and pragmaticists. For more information on the development of the notion see Markkanen and Schröder (1997) or Hyland (1998).

7. Mauranen also discusses hedging in academic writing and describes academic discourse as "a world [...] where it is natural to cultivate hedges" (1997:115).

8. More support on absent gender differences with respect to politeness can be found in Deutschmann (2003). In his detailed study on apologising in British English the author states that "[n]o significant gender differences in the apology rates were observed" (2003:112).

9. Another piece of evidence for missing gender differences is the result of a BRILC male and BRILC female frequency word list comparison. On top of both female and male keyword lists we find lexical items which are closely related to the topics of the individual books under review (e.g. *bilingual*, *formulaic*, *grammaticalisation*, *literacy*) and names of the book authors or editors (e.g. Davidson, Wray, Aijmer). No typically male or typically female key vocabulary emerged from the word lists.

10. This is a generally acknowledged central pro-corpus argument which is discussed in any good introductory corpus linguistic textbook. See e.g. Hunston (2002:20) and Sinclair (1991:4).

11. The idea that "analysts find what they expect to find" is also one of Stubbs's major criticisms of a number of studies carried out in the field of critical discourse analysis (1997: 102).

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