

Participation in electronic discourse in a "feminist" field¹

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INTRODUCTION

Studies of gender differences in amount of talk have shown that men consistently talk more than women in public settings. Talk in such settings—which include conferences, seminars, formal meetings, and television discussions—draws attention to the speaker in ways that are potentially status-enhancing (Holmes 1992). Moreover, sheer amount of talk may garner speakers credit they do not deserve, as when subjects in a study conducted by Rieken attributed insightful solutions to those who had talked the most during the discussion, even when the solutions had in fact been proposed by other participants (reported in Wallwork 1978). In short, amount of talk is related to status, power, and influence in the public domain.

In recent decades a new form of public discourse has emerged and is taking the academic world by storm. The possibility of communicating via computer network has led to the organization of multiparticipant electronic discussion lists (or conferences or bulletin boards, as they are variously known) in which individuals contribute to discussions on issues of interest within a profession, practice, or academic field. Subscription is free to those with access to Internet, Bitnet, or other wide-area networks, and some lists are exceedingly active, generating hundreds of messages per week.

It is often claimed that the electronic medium exercises a democratizing influence on communication. Citing studies conducted in educational settings, Kahn and Brookshire conclude that individuals communicating via computer "tend to participate more equally in discussions, and discussion is likely to be more democratic in the absence of nonverbal status cues" (1991:245). Users also wax enthusiastic. As one male member of a discussion list recently wrote to another:

One of the greatest strengths of e[lectronic]-mail is its ability to break down socio-economic, racial, and other traditional barriers to the sharing and production of knowledge. You, for example, have no way of knowing if I am a janitor or a university president or an illegal alien—we can simply communicate on the basis of our ideas, not on any preconceived notions of what should be expected (or not expected) from one another.

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The electronic medium is claimed to break down gender barriers as well. Graddol and Swann observe that the introduction of computer conferencing leads to "a change in the traditional pattern of contributions from female and male participants" (1989:175). A number of the medium's characteristics mitigate the likelihood of gender asymmetries: sex non-specific electronic return addresses,² the absence of physical (including intonational) cues signaling relative dominance or submission, and the fact that interruption and overlap are effectively precluded—a subscriber may choose to delete messages, but each message appears on his or her screen in its entirety, in the order in which it was received.³

Despite this optimistic early prognosis, the research which has directly investigated the relationship between gender and participation in electronic discourse calls into question the claim that computers exercise an equalizing effect. In a recent study of the participation patterns of professional linguists on the Linguist electronic discussion list, Herring (to appear) found that female linguists contributed significantly less overall than male linguists—20% and 80% respectively—with women most noticeably silent in discussions of an abstract or theoretical nature. Moreover, when surveyed, both men and women reported feeling irritated by the bombastic and adversarial postings of a small minority of male contributors who effectively dominated the discussions. Herring concluded that women refrain from participating on Linguist due in part to their aversion to the adversarial tone of such discussions.

In the present study, we report on an investigation of participation on a smaller list serving an academic field—composition and rhetoric—in which feminism currently enjoys considerable influence.⁴ This list, Megabyte University (hereafter MBU), is considered by its members to be especially "friendly" and "supportive" relative to other lists. We hypothesized that in a non-adversarial environment, women would be more likely to participate equally in discussions, as predicted by the claims cited above. However, this hypothesis was not supported: while the overall tone of the list was indeed less adversarial, women still contributed only 30% of the messages as compared to 70% contributed by men. Even more revealing patterns emerge when participation is considered on a day-by-day and topic-by-topic basis. In discussion of a feminist topic, the contributions of women at one point exceeded those of the men for two consecutive days. The subsequent disruptions that took place, including male accusations of being "silenced" in the discussion and the threats of several men to unsubscribe from the list, provide support for the view that women and men do not have equal rights to speak in public; by contributing more even temporarily, and on a feminist (and female-introduced) topic, women in the group violated the unspoken convention that control of public discourse belongs rightfully to men.

THE INVESTIGATION

Our investigation focuses on a particularly lively discussion that took place on MBU between November 7 and December 16, 1991. It began as a request by one of the subscribers for reading suggestions for a course he planned to offer on "men's literature." The "men's literature" question soon revealed itself to be

controversial, with participants becoming polarized along gender lines regarding the legitimacy of offering such a course.⁵ Some women feared that the course might be used to perpetuate male hegemony, e.g., by co-opting resources that might otherwise be used for women's literature courses. The men in turn argued that feminists on the list were trying to deny them the right to talk about how gender shapes their identity. In addition to being concerned with gender issues, the "men's literature" discussion contains meta-commentary on gender and "silencing" in the discussion itself.

Participation in the "men's literature" discussion

The first and most obvious indication of gender-based inequality comes from the figures for participation in the "men's literature" discussion as a whole. These figures are summarized in Table 1:

TABLE 1. *Participation in the "men's literature" discussion*

	Female	Male
Number of contributors	18 (30.5%)	41 (69.5%)
Number of contributions	87 (36%)	155 (64%)
Average words per contribution	162	211.5
Total words contributed	14,114 (30%)	32,774 (70%)

As Table 1 shows, men contributed significantly more than women to the discussion overall. 69.5% of the participants were men, who in turn were responsible for contributing 70% of the total words and 64% of the total messages.⁶ Moreover, the average message length for men was 211.5 words, as compared with 162 words for women. Rather than demonstrating a new, democratic form of discourse, these figures support "the traditional pattern of contributions from male and female participants" alluded to by Graddol and Swann (1989:175), whereby men dominate (i.e., in face-to-face conversation) by taking longer and more frequent turns.

Figure 1 below gives a day-by-day breakdown of the number of messages contributed by members of each sex to the "men's literature" discussion.⁷ It shows that males (M) contributed more than females (F) nearly every day on which the discussion took place. What is also striking, however, is that the number of contributions by both sexes rose dramatically in the period between November 21 and November 27. Of special interest is the three-day period between November 21 and 24, which contains the only continuous span (November 22 through 23) when the contributions of women exceeded those of men. Participation in the discussion then rose to a peak between November 24 and 27, dropping off and stabilizing after Thanksgiving, which was celebrated on November 28 that year.

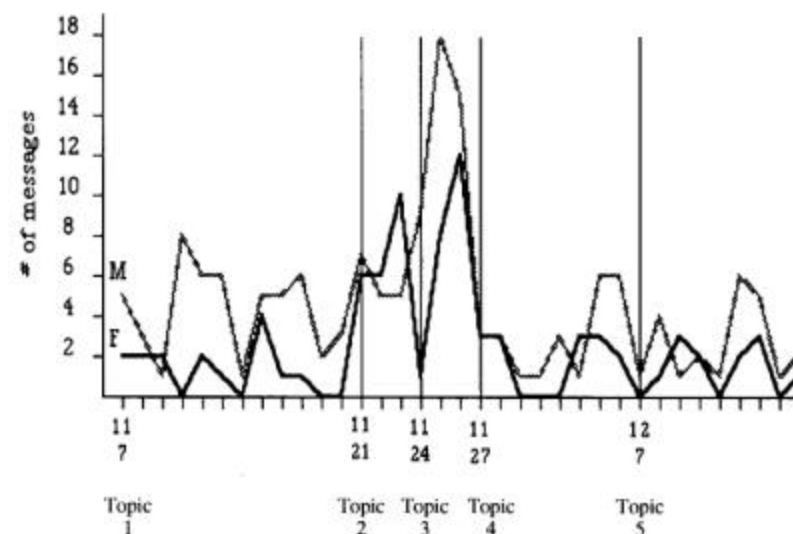


FIGURE 1: Number of messages by day

Explanations for this variability begin to suggest themselves when we take into account what MBU members were talking about at any given time. The vertical lines in Figure 1 indicate transitional points at which new topics of discussion were taken up by the group. Five such topics arose in the course of the discussion as a whole:

- Topic 1:** Men's literature course (M)
- Topic 2:** Silencing of women in the discussion (F)
- Topic 3:** Threats of three members to unsubscribe, and reactions to this (M)
- Topic 4:** Male hegemony in English departments (F)
- Topic 5:** Statistics posted by one of the members (similar to those in Table 1) showing male and female participation in the discussion to date (M)

Topics 1, 3, and 5 were introduced by males; Topics 2 and 4 were introduced by females. Participation by topic is shown in Figure 2.

Men contributed the greatest number of messages on Topics 1 and 3, both introduced by men, and the least on Topic 2, which was introduced by women. Women, on the other hand, contributed the most on Topic 2. Indeed, this is the only period in the discussion when the usual pattern of men posting more messages than women is reversed. We suggest that this reversal—the fact that women were talking more, and on a female-introduced topic—made men uncomfortable to the point of threatening to unsubscribe, and that it was ultimately responsible for male perceptions of "silencing" and female dominance in the discussion.

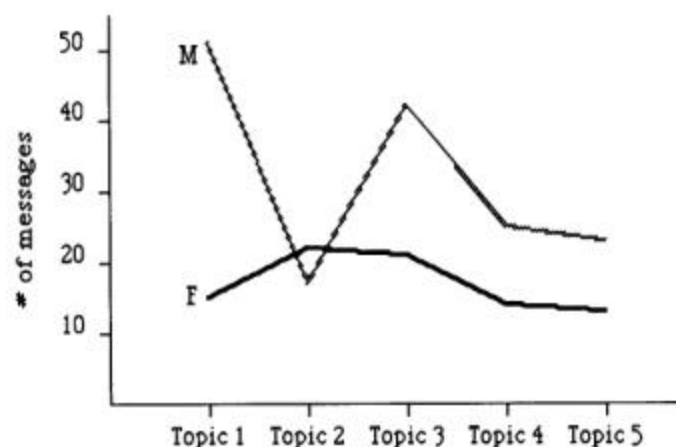


FIGURE 2: Number of messages by topic

Why, when men dominated the five-week discussion overall, would a few days when women happened to contribute more be perceived as a threat? To begin with, the number of women's contributions took a leap on November 21 relative to what had come before, as can be seen in Figure 1. Second, the women continued to contribute actively the next day and the next, exceeding the contributions of the men for two days straight, a situation without precedent in the discussion thus far. Spender (1979) found that male academics perceive women as dominating when they contribute as little as 30% of the talk. What would men then feel when women contributed more than half? ⁸

Note that during this period men posted no fewer messages in absolute terms than they had previously. Yet on November 23 a male contributor (the one who posted the original request for texts on "men's literature") wrote and, addressing two of the more vocal women in the group by name, complained, "You may not feel very powerful outside this net or this discourse community, but here on the inside you've come very close to shutting all of us men up and down." The perception that men had been shut up (or down) is clearly contradicted by the fact of their participation—this man's message alone is 1,098 words, the longest in the entire discussion, and four other lengthy messages were contributed by men on the same day as well—yet it is consistent with Spender's observation that women need not truly dominate in order to be perceived as doing so.

The evening of that same day and the morning of the next, three men (none of whom had participated in the discussion thus far) posted public messages in which they announced their intention to unsubscribe from the list.⁹ The reasons given were that the discussion, having begun as a well-intentioned request for help in selecting texts for a course, had degenerated into "insults," "vituperation," and "vilification." They hastened to assure other members that they had no problem with discussing gender issues; rather, what upset them was the "tone" of the debate.

In looking back over the messages posted during the immediately preceding days, however, we find little evidence of a vituperative tone. With one exception, the contributions of the women appear to be aimed at furthering communication; they raise questions about the interaction at hand (specifically, the lack of male response to female concern about the proposed course), explain their own views, and encourage others to respond in kind.¹⁰ The only message indisputably negative in tone was posted by the man who proposed the "men's literature" course in the first place. In it, he accuses women on the list of "posting without thinking [their contributions] through carefully first," of leveling "charges" rather than questions at the men, and in general, of "bashing," "guilt-tripping," and "bullying" men who didn't follow a strict feminist line. A man who overtly sided with the women also comes under attack: he is accused of betraying his brothers out of feminist-induced guilt.

If the only vituperation comes from the man whose cause they allegedly support, why then did the three men threaten to leave the list? The reasons are not hard to find, nor did they escape the notice of participants on MBU at the time: it was a "boy"cott, a "power play" intended to silence those who persisted in speaking uncomfortable truths. It is no coincidence that threats of withdrawal occurred on and immediately following a day when the majority of messages were posted by women.

Ironically, the boycott had the reverse of its intended effect—it shamed the other men on the list into cooperating, at least temporarily, with the women's attempts to change the topic of discussion to one of feminist concern: the issue of male hegemony within the field of English. The period labeled as "Topic 3" in Figures 1 and 2 above was thus a turning point in the gender dynamics of the discussion, a turning point, as we demonstrate below, that is reflected on various levels of the discourse.

Responses

Revealing evidence comes from a consideration of how—and how often—participants of each sex were responded to in the discussion. Male participants received more responses than female participants overall: 89.2% of male postings in the "men's literature" discussion received explicit responses, as compared with only 70.6% of female postings. This disparity led one female participant to observe:

I am fascinated that my thoughtful . . . response on the "men's lit" thread was met with silence . . . while an anonymous man . . . with a silly little 3-liner gets fascinated and committed responses. . . . When threads initiated by women die from lack of response that's silencing; when women do not respond on threads initiated by men for reasons to do with fear (and the fear may be fear of verbal or other reprisal, ridicule, whatever)—. . . that's silencing.

Lack of response to postings questioning the proposed "men's literature" course prompted another frustrated woman to write, "Are you (in general) listening to

what's being communicated?," and a third to conclude a message by "shouting" in capital letters: "IS THERE ANYBODY OUT THERE?"

Figure 3 charts the percentage of response (100% = 1 response per message) received by females and males according to topic.¹¹

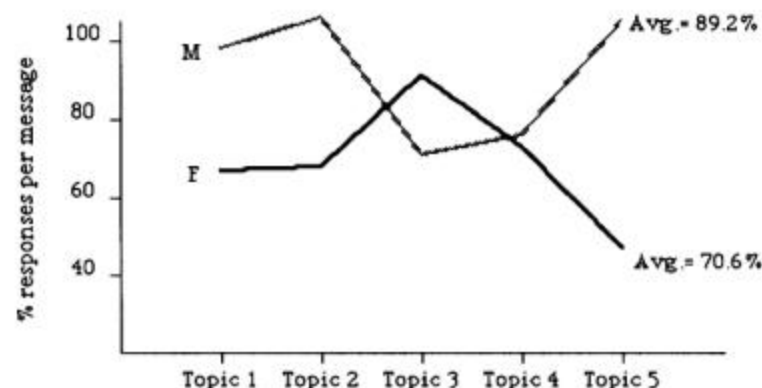


FIGURE 3: Responses received in relation to messages posted

As Figure 3 shows, men were responded to more than women at all times during the discussion, except during Topic 3, the period of male threats to leave the list. The reversal of the usual pattern of response during Topic 3 appears to be a reaction to the reversal in participation during Topic 2 (see Figure 2 above), and reinforces the notion that amount of talk is power: by contributing more, women earned a higher rate of response to their messages.

Also of interest is the matter of who responds to whom. The most frequent direction of response is men to men (33.4%), followed by women to men (21.3%), men to women (15.8%), and finally women to women (11.2%). (The remaining responses (18.3%) were addressed to the group as a whole.) Both men and women thus respond more to men, an indication of the more powerful status of men in the group overall. The number of responses directed to participants of each sex is shown for men in Figure 4 and for women in Figure 5 below.

Men on MBU are consistent in responding most to men on topics introduced by men, as shown in Figure 4. Their rate of response to postings by women is consistently low throughout. Note that in acknowledging the topic of hegemony (Topic 4), which was introduced by women, men avoid responding directly to women (since to do so would be to concede power) by addressing their postings to the group (G) as a whole.

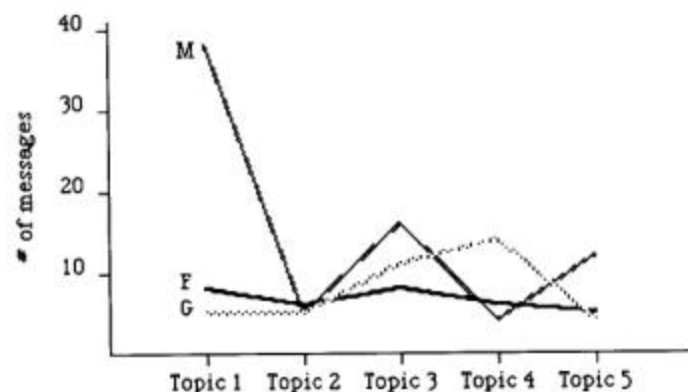


FIGURE 4: Responses to males, females, and group by topic (men only)

Women show a different pattern. As Figure 5 indicates, women respond most to men throughout, except during Topic 3, when the pattern of response is reversed:

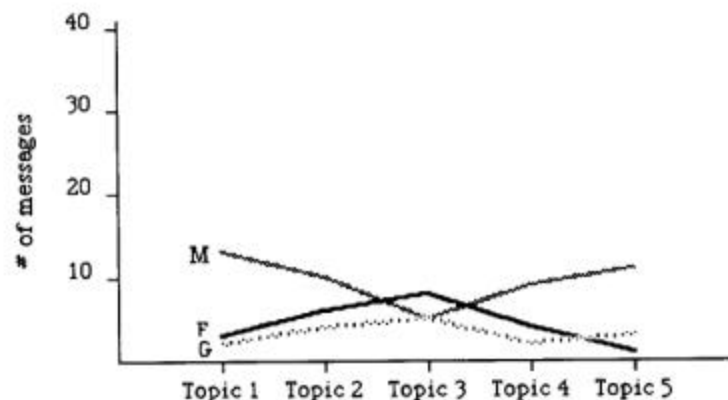


FIGURE 5: Responses to males, females, and group by topic (women only)

Are women responding most to other women about the threats of three men to leave the list (Topic 3)? In fact, they are not; rather, women at this point are virtually ignoring Topic 3 and pursuing the topic of hegemony (Topic 4) among themselves instead. This is further evidence that the tide of the discourse has turned; the women, having struggled throughout the earlier part of the discussion to make themselves heard and having succeeded in gaining the floor on the topic of silencing (Topic 2), are finally empowered to talk about what they want, and they do so among themselves. The increases both in women's responses to women during the time period identified as Topic 3 and in men's responses to the group during Topic

4 can be seen as reactions to women having gained control of the conversational floor.

Hedges

Yet another revealing piece of evidence comes from the use of hedges. Hedges—qualifiers such as *sort of*, *a little*, and *somewhat*, the modals *may* and *might*, and expressions such as *perhaps*, *conceivably*, and *it seems*—have been observed to occur more frequently in the speech of women, especially in situations where women are relatively powerless (Lakoff 1975; O'Barr & Atkins 1980). In the "men's literature" discussion, women use more hedges than men overall.¹² However, while women's use of hedges *decreases* steadily, men's use of hedges *increases* as the discussion builds in intensity, dropping off after the worst of the conflict has passed. This is charted in Figure 6:

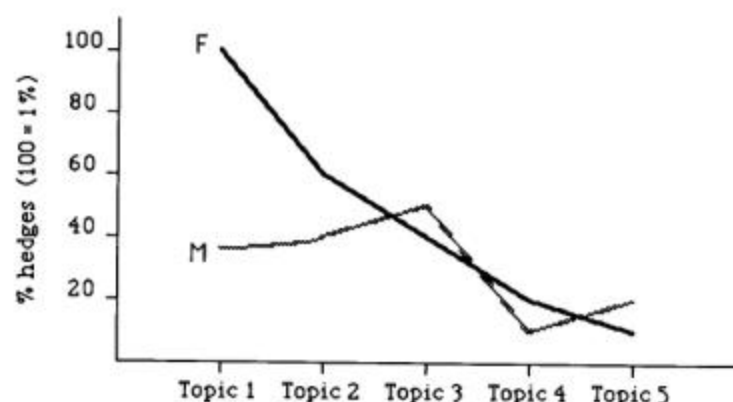


FIGURE 6: Percentage of words which are hedges

Men hedge most during the period identified as Topic 3, resulting in another reversal of the usual pattern. Thus men exhibit features of powerless language at a time when women are relatively more empowered in the discourse.

Survey results

Finally, the hypothesis that power relations underwent a reversal in the discussion is supported by the results of a survey we created and disseminated on MBU two months after the "men's literature" discussion had taken place. The survey included the following two questions:

- (1) In the course of the debate, two basic positions were expressed: a "pro" position, which essentially supported the offering of courses on men's literature, and a "con" position opposed to or concerned by the offering of courses of this type. If you had to choose, which side would you say was ultimately more successful in persuading the group as a whole to its point of view?

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- (2) How satisfied were you personally with the outcome of the debate?

Twenty-eight people responded to the survey (M=18; F=10) either privately or by posting their responses publicly.¹³ Their responses to question (1) are summarized in Table 2.

TABLE 2. Survey results for question (1): Who won the "men's literature" debate?

	Pro	Con	Neither	Other
Female	10.0%	30.0%	40.0%	20.0%
Male	11.1%	50.0%	33.3%	5.6%
Both	10.7%	42.9%	35.7%	10.7%

While the greatest percentage (40%) of women responded that neither side had been more persuasive, the majority of men (50%) indicated that the "con" (i.e., female) position had prevailed. These responses are especially revealing in that the original question could be interpreted as biased towards a "pro" response: the person who suggested the "men's literature" course did, in fact, go on to teach it, and survey respondents were aware of this fact. Why did more men than women say that the "women's side" had won the debate? Clearly, they perceived the women to have been more powerful than the women perceived themselves to have been, or than the external circumstances indicated.

Not coincidentally, male survey respondents also indicated a lower level of satisfaction than females with the outcome of the debate (question 2). On a scale where 2 = very satisfied, 0 = indifferent, and -2 = very dissatisfied, the men's responses averaged -0.06 (indifferent to somewhat dissatisfied), while the women's averaged 0.6 (somewhat satisfied). Additional comments made by survey respondents on the overall tone of the debate provide further evidence of differing levels of satisfaction. Female respondents tended to comment that they found the discussion "interesting," "provocative," "gratifying," and "impressive," although several also expressed weariness at having to fight the "same old battles." The comments of the male respondents, in contrast, range from reporting themselves to have been "initially shocked" to describing the debate as a "no-win" discussion and characterizing it as "whining," "yelling and screaming," and (from the man who posted the original "men's literature" request) "a bad-tempered festival of condemnation and defense."

Finally, the survey asked respondents the question: "Do you consider yourself to be a feminist, and if so, how strongly?" 100% of respondents of both sexes indicated that they were either strong feminists or supporters of feminist principles.

CONCLUSION

We have presented data to show that despite considerable external evidence to the contrary (amount of participation, rate of response, real-world outcome of the debate), men perceived women as dominating the "men's literature" discussion. This perceptual reversal of dominance can be traced to a two-day period during

which women contributed more messages than men. Immediately following this period, men threatened to leave the list, began hedging more, and ultimately abandoned a male-introduced topic to talk about a female-introduced topic instead (although without responding directly to the women involved). Moreover, when surveyed later, men were more inclined to state that the women's side of the argument had "won" and to express dissatisfaction with the discussion overall.

The feminist overtones of the women's contributions, along with the fact that they were critical of a topic introduced and supported by men, no doubt contributed to the discomfort experienced by the men in the group. Yet the implied accusations that the women were "vituperative" and "unreasonable" are not supported by our analysis, nor indeed is such a characterization consistent with the women's supposedly greater rhetorical effectiveness in persuading others to their point of view, as male survey respondents claimed. In fact, we suggest that women on the list were neither vituperative nor especially persuasive—what won them the floor was their persistence in participating, and male reactions to that persistence.

What are the implications of these findings for electronic discourse more generally? It is significant that after their brief period of more-or-less equal participation, women on MBU retreated to a lower level of participation, such that their contributions to the discussion overall did not exceed 30%. Moreover, in discussions on MBU in the four months since, women's contributions have averaged slightly less than 20%, even on topics of broad general interest.¹⁴ The 20% figure is also consistent with earlier findings (Herring to appear) for women's participation on the Linguist list. If it is true that women, including successful, well-educated, academic women, are accorded less than equal speaking rights in mixed-sex public discourse, then it appears that the amount they are expected to speak, all other factors being equal, is between 20 and 30%.

The 20-30% figure is supported by evidence from a variety of public discourse types, both spoken and written. In an academic seminar, Spender (1979) found that 30% was the upper limit before men felt that women were contributing more than their share. In publishing, at least until very recently, only about 20% of works appearing in print were written by women; male publishers consider that to publish more women would be "risky" (Spender 1989). Finally, in a recent survey of American television commercials, students in a sociolinguistics course taught by the first author of this paper found that women were spokespersons in only 28% of the commercials aired. This last observation is particularly interesting, in that it reinforces the view that society at large recognizes as "normal" a less than equal amount of talk by women. In a society where such an expectation is conventionalized and even exploited for commercial ends, it is small wonder that the electronic medium does not—cannot—in and of itself make for equal communication between the sexes.

Nevertheless, increased feminist awareness may help. The fact that MBU women spoke up, persisted in speaking up even when ignored, and appealed successfully to other women in the group for support can be attributed to widespread feminist consciousness within the field of composition and rhetoric. Further, the political reality of feminism in the field constrained (according to self-report) the males in the group to hedge their objections and ultimately to concede the

floor—at least temporarily—to the women. Of course, these results did not come about without effort (as one woman later put it, "A small war was necessary on MBU for a bit of consciousness raising"), and the women's communicative efforts were met with resistance as soon as they appeared to be taking up more than their "share" of the discussion.

Women may never gain the right to equal participation, however, unless we assume that the right is ours already and act accordingly. Given the growing importance of computer-mediated communication in the current information age, electronic discussion groups might well be a good place to start.

NOTES

1. An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the Workshop on Theoretical Perspectives on Electronic Discourse, College Composition and Communication Conference, Cincinnati, Ohio, March 18, 1992. Our thanks go to John Burt for his helpful comments on that version.
2. Gender non-specific return addresses (such as those containing sender's last name only, or a more or less random sequence of letters and numbers) were apparently used in the communication observed by Graddol and Swann, which took place at the Open University in Great Britain. In the American-based lists reported on in this paper, however, the sex of participants is generally known because their first name is part of their return address or because they sign their messages or because their address is otherwise known within the community.
3. Messages are typically posted to an intermediary machine, or listserver, before being distributed to subscribers. Some lists have a moderator who exercises a degree of editorial control over the content (and less commonly, the order) of messages; generally, however, messages are distributed on a strict "first come, first served" basis.
4. In support of this point, at the recent College Composition and Communication Conference (CCCC) in Cincinnati, the number of sessions on "gender and feminist theory" ranked third out of 27 topics. The only two topics that had more sessions were devoted to practical teaching issues.
5. One man supported the feminist position throughout, and several others supported parts of it during the later portions of the discussion; overall, however, most men favored the idea of a men's literature course, and all participating women expressed concerns about such a course.
6. The subscription figures for MBU are 42% female and 58% male (out of a total of 178 subscribers), based on a count of names from which gender can reliably be determined.
7. The intervals between dates in Topics 1, 4, and 5 are fewer than the number of calendar days since we have included in Figure 1 only those days on which messages related to men's literature were contributed.
8. At the height of the reversal, on November 23, women contributed 66.6% of the day's messages. However, since the women's messages were shorter, men still contributed more words.
9. One man did in fact unsubscribe; the other two were persuaded to remain on the list.
10. The one exception is a contribution in which the writer presents her feminist views dogmatically, rather than cooperatively; this message accuses one of the male participants of "intellectualizing."
11. Responses were counted as only those messages which explicitly acknowledge an earlier posting. Excluded were messages pertaining to the topic under discussion but addressed to the group as a whole, as well as first postings on a new topic.
12. Hedges constitute 0.48% of women's words and 0.36% of the words contributed by men.
13. Of these, 18 (M=13; F=5) had participated in the original discussion.
14. For example, in a recent discussion of the usefulness of composition theory in teaching writing, contributions by women account for only 16.9% of the 142-message total.

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Sex differences in address terminology in the 1990s¹

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INTRODUCTION

Brown and Ford (1961) have pointed out that choice of address term is determined primarily by the parameters of intimacy and status. Kramer (1975) added another primary factor to this model, that of sex. Not only are some terms clearly sex-related, such as *sir*, *brother*, and *miss*, but also the use of certain types of address terms—endearment terms, insult terms, nicknames, etc.—varies in frequency depending on sex of speaker and addressee.

Freshman students in a course the author taught in fall 1991 were strongly of the opinion that differences between men's and women's speech patterns are disappearing. Nevertheless, a study of address terminology collected by these same students shows there are still dramatic differences in address patterns, according to sex of both addressor and addressee. At the same time, certain address patterns which used to be considered primarily male are found to be robust among young women at the present time.

Freshmen women in the course expressed the opinion that men and women now "speak the same," using all the same forms in address and other walks of life. If this claim made by the students is correct, it is certainly most likely to be correct in that very population—a group of young adults, born after the beginning of the women's liberation movement and with a generation of feminist thinking behind them, middle class, in college, and independent enough to be living away from home.

These same freshmen men and women were asked to do two assignments on address: one to report the terms they use when speaking to their relatives; and the other to record all address terms used to them during a period of several days.

In this paper, the combined results of the students' assignments will be tested against their claim that men and women speak the same. The paper will also consider how men and women are spoken to. There are many different semantic parameters by which an address term may vary; I will concentrate primarily on one of these, the semantics of *intimacy*.

KINSHIP ADDRESS PRACTICES

Parental address

Let us begin with a look at what students who speak English at home call their parents. It is well known that the terms *Mom* and *Dad* are now by far the most widely used address terms for parents in American English, with *Dad* replacing the