Chapter 8 – Male and Female

8.1 Some of the studies referred to in the book focus on the way men and women speak, others on the way men and women are referred to. In the first task we will look at the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MICASE) to investigate the way men and women use language.

(i) Go to http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/micase/. Click on “General Information about MICASE” at the bottom of the page and read especially “Statistical Overview of Speakers and Speech Events” to get an overview of the contents of this corpus.

(ii) Click on “Search MICASE” (you may have to go back to the first page to find this link).

(iii) In the search form, click on “Female” under search attributes and type in sorry in the search box. Click on “Submit search”.

(iv) Write down the frequency of sorry, which is given at the top of the results page. Note that you immediately get the concordance and can see how the keyword is used.

(v) Repeat the procedure in (iii) and (iv) for the speaker category “Male”.

(vi) Repeat the procedures in (iii)–(v) for pardon and excuse me.

(vii) The statistical overview of the corpus states that the gender proportions in the corpus are 54 per cent female, 46 per cent male. Compare the frequencies of sorry, pardon and excuse me with those figures. Can you draw any conclusions about male and female language from this? You may want to go back to the concordances to look more closely at how the keywords are used in the discourse situation.

8.2 Think of some other linguistic features that it might be interesting to investigate in MICASE from the point of view of gender. Note that you can specify many more features, such as discourse type and academic role of speaker, but since the corpus is relatively small, if you specify too much the numbers may be quite low.

8.3 Table 8.9 in the book shows the adjectives most frequently used with man and woman in the BNC. Now make a similar investigation in the BNC and COCA of what items occur in the frame his/her + Adj + Noun.
(i) Log into BYU-BNC. Click “List” under “Display”. Type his in the search box. Then go
down to “POS LIST” and select “adj.ALL” so that [aj*] appears in the search box. Repeat
this action and select “noun.ALL” so that [nn*] appears in the search box after [aj*]. The
search string should now be: his [aj*] [nn*].

(ii) Click on “Search”. Among the results, mark the first twenty examples, copy them and
paste them into a word processing document.

(iii) Repeat (i) and (ii) but change his to her.

(iv) Log in to COCA and repeat (i)–(iii).

(v) Compare the lists for his and her in the BNC. What differences can you see? Then
compare the lists for his and her in COCA. Can you draw any conclusions from these results?

8.4 The terminology relating to gender and sexuality has changed over time, because of
various social developments. Use the Time Corpus to see how some of these terms have
changed in frequency from the 1920s to the 2000s.

(i) Log in to the Time Corpus. Under “Display”, click on “Chart”. Type in the search word
gay and click on ”Search”. Copy the chart into a word processing document, or note down the
normalised frequencies for each decade.

(ii) Repeat for the following words: homosexual, lesbian. Note the frequencies and compare
with gay.

(iii) Investigate some other individual words or sets of words related to gender or sexuality
in a similar manner.

Note that the results in Exercise 8.4 only say something about which words made it into one
specific publication, Time Magazine.