Does Men's Support Come on Time?:
An Analysis of Minimal Responses in Men's Talk

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ABSTRACT

Minimal responses are the linguistic devices that are mainly used by women. They are typically regarded as cooperative enhancers. Unlike women, men use delayed minimal responses that show a lack of support, attention, and interest. Nevertheless, this paper addresses the issue of men's language and the use of minimal responses as a strategy to build conversations cooperatively. The data of this study comprise 180 minutes of audio-recorded transcribed conversations of four groups of men who were either classmates, close friends, or both. The frequency count of minimal responses is tabulated quantitatively, and the conversation analysis approach is applied to reflect qualitative findings. The findings indicate that the stereotypical linguistic features which are assigned to men need to be reconsidered and challenged in various settings. In this study, men are as highly capable as women in selectively showing their support and interest, particularly to the issues that matter to them whenever required. This paper also references the social distance and the topic of conversation as the significant effects of minimal responses.

Keywords: conversation topic; cooperation; men's talk; minimal responses; social distance

INTRODUCTION

Minimal responses are the words or sounds such as *right, ok, yeah, mhm, u-huh,* indicating interactants' attention in communication (Schegloff, 1972). According to Schegloff, interactants employ these minimal responses in order to demonstrate a "continued, coordinated hearership" (Schegloff, 1972, p. 380). Minimal responses primarily signify the listeners' active attention to what is being uttered, and this motivates the speakers to continue speaking (Cogo & Deway, 2012).

In general, it is not easy to define minimal responses. In this regard, Reid (1995) emphasises that it is almost impossible to establish criteria to distinguish what minimal responses are. However, she delineates some features that items should have to meet the basic definition of minimal responses. Minimal responses, according to Reid (1995), should be brief responses in reply to another speaker without any significant semantic content to show active participation or agreement. Moreover, minimal responses should not interrupt the flow of speech, and they should have either a completed or continuing intonation.

Since the basic function of minimal responses is maintaining active listenership, it is then predicted that without minimal responses, the possibility of misunderstanding between the speakers arises, and the basic element of conversational comprehension is distorted. In this respect, Norrick (2012) confirms that there are connections between the types of minimal responses and

the degree to which they show the listeners' attention and interests. He has also uncovered that the types of minimal responses can indicate the listeners' interests or lack of interests. Based on his research, some responses such as '*uh-huh*' do not signify listeners' interests while some others such as '*vow*' indicate the listener's attentiveness and interest in what is being talked about. Due to the positive roles that minimal responses play in a conversation, they consequently create a friendly atmosphere to help the speakers maintain their group unity (White, 2015).

Nonetheless, contrarily to most of the studies that emphasise the connection between minimal responses and attentiveness, in a study on interactional strategies (Lacia et al., 2019), the researchers found that the use of minimal responses can also indicate that the topic of conversation is not interesting for the listeners and as a result the current speaker uses minimal responses to change the topic. However, Lacia and his collaborators (2019) do not mention in detail how minimal responses demonstrate a lack of interest in conversation topics. It is believed that gender as performance is ordained in the speech of the interactants (Jule, 2018) in various social private and public settings such as everyday exchanges, doctor-patient conversations (Mohajer & Endut, 2020), workplace talk (Holmes, 2008), teacher-student interactions (French & French, 1984; Croll, 1985; Krkovic et al., 2014) and communication through Short Message Services (SMS) (Keong et al., 2012). While interacting, women and men not only establish but also reveal their femininity and masculinity (Holmes, 1997).

In the domain of language and gender, minimal responses are mainly connected to women who use mitigating linguistic forms in their communication (Lakoff, 1975). Mitigating linguistic forms are the features that are used by women in an interaction; they are often claimed to signify women's weaknesses. Nonetheless, Coates (2014) argues that although minimal responses exemplify women's talk, they do not necessarily show women's weaknesses. These items are only considered weak when women use them in mixed-gender interactions, where male speakers disregard women speakers' active listening skills. Men, as opposed to most women, do not generally use frequent minimal responses (Holmes, 2013; Kanwal et al., 2017; Engström, 2018). If they use minimal responses, the projection of these features might be delayed, a signal of men's inattentiveness in interactions (Zimmerman & West, 1975). In the media setting, however, Pasfield-Neofitou (2007) discovered that the statuses, as opposed to gender of the participants, may alter the occurrence of minimal responses. In other words, other factors may influence the use of minimal responses in interactions.

Most of the studies to date focus on minimal responses in women's talk (Lakoff, 1975; Fishman, 1983; Coates, 2014; Engström, 2018; Mishra, 2020) since these elements are associated with women and their speech style. Nonetheless, there is not much attention paid to men's use of minimal responses in conversation. There are scarce research that examine the ways in which masculinity is reflected in men's speech; understanding men's talk might better be investigated (Kiesling, 2007). This study, therefore, attempts to enter the domain of men's talk and examine men's use of minimal responses. Another influencing factor, social distance, which can affect the usage and the function of minimal responses, is also investigated. This study can add valuable information to previous studies in the intersection of minimal responses and gender.

MINIMAL RESPONSES AND GENDER

In sociolinguistics, women and men are predominantly different in the use and usage of minimal responses. It is a widespread principle that women employ minimal responses more than men (Zimmerman & West, 1975; Reid, 1995; Holmes, 2013; Kanwal et al., 2017; Engström, 2018; Mishra, 2020). Based on Fishman's research (1983), women are engaged in "support work" (Fishman, 1983, p. 96), and "active maintenance" (Fishman, 1983, p. 98). When women use minimal responses, they attempt to create a supportive environment for the interactants to talk, and at the same time, maintain their conversation.

Minimal responses are usually well-timed to display 1) interactants' active participation, 2) interests in speakers' content of information (Coates, 2014). As a result, conversational support and solidarity are maintained via minimal responses (Maltz & Borker, 2011; Tannen, 2013; Coates, 2014). As cited earlier, while the use of minimal responses indicates listeners' cooperation and attentiveness, the lack of minimal responses means the opposite. In this view, Zimmerman and West (1975) and Fishman (1983) believe that men tend to demonstrate their lack of interest and attention through minimal responses. Nevertheless, men are found to keep conversations going without any supportive feedback from the listeners (Pilkington, 1998). As can be perceived, men, as opposed to women, generally do not share the same meanings of minimal responses.

On the other hand, when men use minimal responses, they aim to convey a different message than the message women try to express. First, minimal responses indicate participants' agreement rather than attention and solidarity (Maltz & Borker, 2011; Sulastri, 2019). Second, men prefer using minimal responses to agree with statements rather than showing their camaraderie. In other words, showing cooperation and maintaining friendship via minimal responses is not a priority for men. This indicates that gender affects the function of minimal responses. With this in mind, the present study attempts to look at the instances where men employ minimal responses. Furthermore, this paper intends to explore the functions and purposes of minimal responses among male interactants while considering the social distance among them.

SOCIAL DISTANCE IN COMMUNICATION

A prominent factor affecting the process of communication is the social distance between the interactants. In general, social distance shows familiarity among interactants. The presence or lack of social distance can affect the manners in which speakers communicate. Nessa Wolfson (1986) is a pioneer of speech behaviour, whose work on social distance established the Bulge theory. Bulge theory posits that the frequency of occurrences of certain types of speech behaviour is scattered across a diagram of social distance and speech behaviour. Two extreme ends of this diagram demonstrate similar patterns compared to the middle section. Wolfson (1986) found that the speech behaviour of each end of the diagram—at one end, close relationship and the other end distant relationship—has many similarities. Based on this theory, the reason lies in the fact that when social distance and relationships are homogeneous and fixed, the interlocutors' expectations are more comprehensive and straightforward. In other words, when the social distance is minimal, the speakers could anticipate the types of social behaviour. In the same vein, when the social distance among interactants is high, the speakers could anticipate the required types of social behaviour that is consistent with the situation, minimising the misperception. However, standing

in the middle of the diagram, where social distance is neither low nor high, the interlocutors appear to be in confusion concerning the social behaviour expectations and reveals.

The Bulge theory also discloses that "most solidarity-establishing speech behaviour takes place among status-equal friends and acquaintances" (Boxer, 1993, p. 103). In other words, when the social distance is minimal among the interactants with similar status in society, their speech behaviour leans towards solidarity, and the interactants are more inclined to establish and maintain their solidarity. Consistent with the Bulge theory, the social distance between the interactants influences the ways in which they communicate (Eshraghi & Shahrokhi, 2016). For instance, when there is no social distance between the interactants, they use various conversational strategies to be friendly to decrease the number of misunderstandings. This is well demonstrated in another study where the respondents use humour to decrease the assertiveness of their statements (Shahrokhi & Jan, 2012). Another study has unveiled that the closeness of the participants has an impact on their choice to speak or refrain from speaking and subsequently remain silent (Hei et al., 2015). For that reason, various levels of social distance between the interactants can have effects on their interactional linguistic behaviour. In the present study, the social distance between the participants in each group is considered in order to observe its effects on the use and usage of minimal responses in men's talk.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

To conduct this study, 12 men were invited and assigned into four groups. Three participants per group were designated. Although the participants in the groups knew one another, the degree of familiarity was different, although this was unintended. As shown in Table 1, the social distance between the participants differed due to their relationships as shown in Table 1. The participants in group 1 were only classmates, while the participants in groups 2 and 3 were not only classmates but established their friendships beyond the classroom domain. The participants in group 4 were not classmates but they were close friends.

TABLE 1. The participants' acquaintances with one another

Group 1	Relationship	Group 2	relationship	Group 3	Relationship	Group 4	Relationship
N1	Classmates	R1	Friends and classmates	L1	Friends and classmates	K1	Close friends
N2		R2		L2		K2	
N3		R3		L3		K3	

The study's setting was informal to create an intimate and comfortable atmosphere for the participants to communicate. The friendly environment assisted the participants to produce naturally occurring conversation as much as possible. In order to create natural conversations, the participants in each group gathered in one of the participants' living rooms, and they were invited to talk about any topics they desired.

The participants were asked to talk for 45 minutes, and their conversations were audio-recorded. A recorded data of 180 minutes was used for analysis. The recorded conversations were transcribed according to an adapted version of Ten Have's transcription convention (Ten Have, 2007) (See Appendix). To preserve the participants' anonymity, alphabet letters were used to refer to the individuals. In addition, throughout the data, proper names were also replaced by pseudonyms for the purpose of confidentiality.

In order to 1) analyse and discuss the instances of minimal responses among the interactants and 2) to compare the groups, a combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis was used. The frequency count of each minimal response item was tabulated and compared quantitatively (See Table 2). Conversation analysis was utilised to qualitatively analyse the utterances exchanged between the participants in each group. The qualitative approach enables the present study to explain and reveal the linguistic behaviour of the participants and groups comprehensively.

ANALYSIS

The minimal response items which were observed in the conversation of the participants of this study were *'yeah', 'ok', 'yes', 'really', 'uhum', 'ahan/aha', 'exactly', 'oh'*. In Table 2 below, the frequency counts of these eight items were calculated and tabulated based on the number of occurrences in each group. In addition, the total number of minimal responses that each group used in their conversation is evaluated and compared in the following table.

TABLE 2. The frequency counts of minimal responses among the groups

Minimal Responses	Yeah	Ok	Yes	Really	Uhum	Ahan/aha	Exactly	Oh	Total
Group 1	5	14	22	4	5	7	2	1	60
Group 2	20	21	42	6	4	4	2	7	106
Group 3	61	3	5	12	1	3	0	8	93
Group 4	28	2	18	15	7	2	1	3	76

As shown in Table 2, group 2 used minimal responses at the highest rate of 106 times compared to the other groups, and group 1 used them at the lowest rate of only 60 times. Since minimal responses indicate the participants' collaboration and solidarity in an interaction, it is therefore inferred that the participants in group 2 were the most cooperative interactants compared to the rest of the participants in the other groups.

In this study, minimal responses were used in two manners of cooperative and uncooperative minimal responses. On the one hand, cooperative minimal responses refer to the features which are well-timed and placed when and where they are supposed and expected to show the listeners' attentiveness, concern, and support. On the other hand, uncooperative minimal responses are delayed, and not well-timed and they indicate the listeners' lack of interest, attention and encouragement.

COOPERATIVE MINIMAL RESPONSES

Most of the cooperative minimal responses were seen among the participants in groups 2, 3, and 4. These men used appropriately well-timed minimal responses in an attempt to show a cooperative attitude towards the current speaker.

Example 1 (Group 4)

1 K3:   no no no no / let it go / let it go / let it go / uh / sorry everybody I wanted to add something *on the record* it's so important to *me*
2 K2:   yes
3 K3:   personally / //

4 K1:   // ok
5 K3:   K1 / the one who is speaking / the one who spoke a lot about Cinema Paradiso and …

Example 1 demonstrates that the participants were talking about a movie that they had all watched. In this extract, we can observe that K2 and K1 used minimal responses cooperatively in order to give positive feedback and encouragement to the current speaker, K3, who intended to say something which was important to him. For instance, in line 2, K2 showed his support and attentiveness by using a minimal response at the exact point where the speaker's sentence was complete. The minimal response 'yes' in line 2 also signalled the listener's eagerness to listen to what the current speaker intended to say. Further down, when K3 in line 3 paused shortly after saying 'personally', another speaker, K1, projected a minimal response in line 4 to similarly show his interest to know more. Although the projection of the minimal responses looks like interruptions, there was no sign of struggle for winning the floor and the current speaker proceeded smoothly.

Example 2 (Group 3)

6 L1:   you know he wants just to tick the girl / in her in [his list]
7 L3:   [yeah / yeah]
8 L2:   no no no / he want / he want somebody to always feel pity about him you know
9 L1:   yeah
10 L3:   he [wants to] feel ((he snaps)) / yeah he can do it
11 L2:   [he's like that]
12 L2:   yeah
13 L3:   you know
14 L2:   yeah he always do that

In Example 2, the interactants were talking about a mutual friend that they were all familiar with, and that created a platform for everyone to insert comments. Here, all the three participants showed their understanding and support via the minimal response 'yeah'. The instances of minimal responses can be seen in lines 7, 9, and 12. Moreover, the conversation topic stimulated familiar references. Example 2 clearly indicates that all the participants in group 3 were supportive, and they adopted a cooperative style in their interaction.

Example 3 (Group 2)

15 R2:   *small* **university**
16 R2:   **Mahdi Mohammed [Gillan] university** do you know her?
17 R3:   [university]
18 R3:   [M.B.A.?]
19 R1:   [aha:::]
20 R2:   *ye:::s*
21 R3:   M.B.A.?
22 R1:   she's nuts
23 R2:   yeah
24 R1:   yeah ((everybody laughs))
25 R3:   M.B.A.?

There are many cooperative minimal response items in Example 3 in lines 19, 20, 23, and 24 where interactants were talking about their mutual friend who had been admitted to a university, and this was a surprise to them. An important point in this excerpt is that R3 in line 18 asked his friends if the field that they were talking about was MBA. Although R1 and R2 uttered 'yeah' several times after that, they did not answer his question. In other words, 'yeah' here did not

function as an affirmative answer but a cooperative enhancer, and that was the reason R3 repeated his question two more times in lines 21 and 25. It also indicates that their conversation was loaded with cooperation that R3 automatically inferred that 'yeah' was not an answer to his question. Instead, 'yeah' was uttered merely to show positive feedback and express solidarity between the interactants. The conversation topic, which was familiar and interesting to everyone, induced minimal responses in abundance as well.

The examples above illustrate that the participants in groups 2, 3 and 4 used minimal responses cooperatively while showing excitement to build on each other's utterances which ultimately created a cooperative atmosphere. The topics that they talked about were familiar to all the interactants; therefore, their conversation was laden with familiar references. It is mainly due to the fact that the social distance between them either did not exist or was minimal.

<center>UNCOOPERATIVE MINIMAL RESPONSES</center>

Uncooperative minimal responses refer to the items which are not well-timed and are uttered later than the expected proper time. Hence, these responses cannot indicate the listeners' support and attentiveness. Most of the uncooperative minimal responses were seen among the participants in group 1, where there was an apparent social distance between them and the level of acquaintance and friendship was lower than in the other groups.

Example 4 (Group 1)

26 N3:   hubble bubble no //
27 N1:   // sometimes
28 N3:   but I don't like it (5.1) yes [I don't like it]
29 N2:   [yeah / did you know] it's more harmful than cigarettes? (4.9)
30 N1:   not more / because you you never use it uh continuously I mean you just use it once a week or twice a
           week

Example 4 clearly shows that the participants were not interested in what the speaker was saying, and as a result, they remained silent and used minimal responses much later than expected. In line 28, when N3 said that he did not like hubble bubble, he paused and waited for the others to leave a comment or acknowledge him. After a long silence of 5.1 seconds, when he did not receive the supportive feedback that he had expected, he used a self-supportive minimal response and proceeded in the same line and repeated, "yes I don't like it". Only after that, N2 in line 29 used a delayed minimal response to possess the floor. This can be a sign of the listener's lack of interest and inattentiveness in what was being discussed which ultimately transferred the sense of uncooperativeness.

Example 5 (Group 1)

31 N2:   ***u:::h*** / and as my memory helps I remember that when I / uh / was / uh / being in the country / for at
           university / uh / when I started smoking cigarette I collected / uh / the signs / uh which was on packets
           (4.1)
32 N1:   uhum
33 N2:   and now uh / I think I have more than thousand label of different cigarettes

Example 5 is another instance of delayed minimal responses where N2 was talking about cigarettes. In line 31, N2 finished his line and remained silent while waiting for a supportive prompt to continue. Next, in line 32, his friend N1, after a long silence of 4.1 seconds, used the

delayed minimal response 'uhum' to reluctantly show that he was following him. The current speaker, N2, immediately after receiving this feedback, proceeded in line 33. It unfolds that N2 was waiting for his friend's support and attentiveness as an enhancer to carry on. This instance indicates that the listener was not cooperative enough to create a friendly atmosphere in the interaction.

Example 6 (Group 1)

34 N2:   I think it is totally *wrong* (4.3)
35 N1:   yeah *it is wrong*

Example 6 is another indication of delayed minimal responses where the listener, N1, reluctantly showed his agreement in line 35 after a long pause (4.3 seconds). This is considered uncooperative because the minimal response did not happen immediately after the current speaker's sentence.

The examples presented in this section signify that the participants in group 1 were not as cooperative as the other groups in showing their interest in the topic of conversation or highlighting their active roles as listeners due to the social distance among them. Moreover, due to the existing social distance among the participants in group 1, familiar references in the discussion topics were rare. It adds to the instances of delayed and uncooperative minimal responses.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of minimal responses among four groups of men indicates that minimal responses were used in two manners in their interaction, cooperatively and uncooperatively. We have discovered that most of the cooperative responses were among the interactants in groups 2, 3 and 4. They created a supportive atmosphere by inserting well-timed minimal responses that appeared at proper times when and where they were mostly expected. It confirms that the interactants were attentive to the current speaker. Moreover, they showed their support and interest in the topics discussed among them because they knew what topics to choose to stimulate enjoyment and cooperation in everyone. Also, since there was a friendship history among them, their conversation was full of familiar references. They either talked about the people that they all knew about or the topics in which everyone was interested. It provides evidence that cooperation existed among them. As a result, they utilised minimal responses to express their interest and motivation as active listeners and create a friendly and cooperative environment, consistent with Coates (2014) who worked on women's talk.

Furthermore, there was no social distance between the participants in groups 2, 3, and 4, appearing to be so close to one another (See Table 1). The lack of social distance was also evident in their friendly, vibrant conversations in which silence was not observed throughout their interaction. As a result, the minimal responses that they used were well-placed and well-timed, while at the same time, the participants built on each other's utterances to produce a cooperative talk. It was also observed that minimal responses were used among the male participants in this study in an uncooperative way where the presence of a minimal response was delayed or followed after a lengthy silence.

We have found that most of the uncooperative minimal responses were among the participants in group 1, where social distance was observed among them. As stated earlier, the participants in this group were not as close to each other as the participants in the other groups.

The participants in group 1 were only classmates, and their friendship was shaped and limited to the classroom confinement. Thus, because there was a social distance between them, most of the minimal responses were delayed and misplaced. It is mainly due to the reason that the presence of social distance did not motivate the participants in group 1 to create a friendly interaction. As a result, they did not sense that they needed to be cooperative with whom they sensed a social distance. In other words, they did not consider it essential to express their interest, attention and cooperation towards the other group members who they were not closely acquainted with. Moreover, the topics which were discussed among the participants in group 1 did not induce any familiar references because they did not have a strong friendship history like the other groups. Thus, they did not express any efforts to use minimal responses to show either their attention or cooperation.

CONCLUSION

The findings in this study yield opposing ideas against existing studies whereby minimal responses are considered as cooperative enhancers used mainly by women. This study shows that men are capable of being cooperative and supportive of each other in interaction, just like women (Mohajer & Jan, 2018). It also unveils that men can be expressive in their language. However, this usually remains unnoticed (Kiesling, 2007). We further argue that the social distance of the interactants in a speech community has an influence on the use of minimal responses. The closer the interactants, the more supportive minimal responses are exchanged between them as constructive feedback support.

Furthermore, the topics which are familiar to the interactants will motivate them to cooperate and create a friendly atmosphere, and consequently, the number of cooperative minimal responses increases. When there is a minimal social distance between the interactants, their conversation is full of familiar references and the topic is more personal, providing an opportunity to form a cooperative atmosphere and add to the conversation topic. The findings also clarify that men in this research selectively used minimal responses in their interaction. It means that men tend to decide when and where to be supportive, while according to previous studies (Holmes, 2013; Coates, 2014), women generally follow an innate cooperative style by employing minimal responses in their interactions.

This study illuminates the way for the researchers in the field of sociolinguistics to challenge and question the linguistic features such as minimal responses which are attached to a specific gender. This study also suggests that various factors can influence the ways in which interactants employ minimal responses in various interactional settings. Thus, we need to further investigate the stereotypical features which are attached to a gender (Lin & Jarvie, 2016). More studies should be conducted to consider and investigate interfering factors such as social distance and settings across conversations involving both women and men.

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APPENDIX

The transcription convention is adapted from Paul Ten Have (2007).

?	Questions or rising intonation
/	A short pause of up to one second
//	Interruptions of utterances without simultaneous speech
:::	Prolongation of the immediately prior sound
Italics	Emphasis
Bold	Loudness
[ ]	Simultaneous speech
(0.0)	Numbers in parentheses show elapsed time in silence by tenth of seconds
(( ))	Non-verbal actions
N1, N2	Capital single letters indicate male speakers in each group, and the immediate number after each letter indicates the order of speakers appearing in conversation
1,2,3	Line numbers