

# The Use of Lexical Hedges in Spoken Language by Female and Male Students

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## Abstract

This study aims to describe lexical hedges used by female and male students in spoken language and to analyze lexical hedges used by female and male students in debate. The method used in this research is descriptive-qualitative method. By using the framework of hedges proposed by Namasaraev (1997), it is concluded that there are differences between female and male respondents' tendency in choosing word of lexical hedges. Female respondents tend to use more lexical hedges than male respondents. In this regard, female respondents most frequently use lexical hedges of fillers such as; *hmm, uhh, you know* in their utterances; while male respondents most frequently use lexical hedges of fillers such as; *I think, uhh, hmm* in their utterances. Female respondents have wide range variety in choosing words of lexical hedges while male respondents are not productive enough in choosing the words of lexical hedges. It is shown by the number of lexical hedges used in giving opinion in debate context.

*Key words:* Lexical hedges, Spoken language, Debate

## INTRODUCTION

In spoken language, much of the meaning is determined by the context. This contrasts with written language, where more meanings are provided directly by the text. In spoken language the truth of a proposition is determined by common-sense reference to experience, whereas in written language a greater emphasis is placed on logical and coherent argument; similarly, spoken language tends to convey subjective information, including the relationship between the speaker and the audience, whereas written language tends to convey objective information.

Since language has different form, it causes the difference in the use of language channel. The differences can be seen accordance with aspect of dictions, phonology, and morphology. The morphological difference is related to the gender of speakers. Lakoff states (via Holmes, 2008, p.298) that, "the differences in using language between women and men are different morphologically because women are

characterized by linguistic features or linguistic forms". Moreover, she exemplifies that the difference of linguistic features by women is in using lexical hedges, e.g. *you know, sort of, well, you see*. Most women frequently use linguistic features than men when expressing an opinion. This statement is supported by Lakoff (cited from Holmes, 2008, p.300), he explains that "women used more hedging and boosting devices than men". Hedging and boosting here are defined by Lakoff (via Holmes, 2008, p.299) states as "a number of linguistic features which were unified by their function of expressing lack of confidence or showing the expression of uncertainty or tentativeness".

Thus, in using the language as a phenomenon of linguistics, there are differences regarding human gender. That phenomenon can be observed easily in spoken form, for example in debate. It can be observed easily in debate, because people give different opinion about something. There will be some linguistic features, here is the use of lexical hedges

in spoken language. Therefore, the differences between women and men in spoken language will appear in their linguistic features.

In debating or giving opinion both women and men will vary. It is possible that women will apply lexical hedges more than men. Holmes restates Lakoff's theory (2008, p.298): "women are characterized by linguistics features such as lexical hedges". The language used between female and male students is different in several aspects. It can be seen from the characteristic of women's linguistic features such as in using lexical hedges. Based on the rationale above, the research questions for this study are: What lexical hedges are used by female and male students in spoken language especially in debate? What are the differences between female and male students in using the lexical hedges?

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Language is a form of social interaction of people, either women or men that occurs in concrete situation. Furthermore, language is not only as a social indication but also individual. Language as a social indication means that it is not only decided by linguistic factor but also social and situation. The examples of social factor are backgrounds of education, social status, age, sex, gender and so on. Moreover, Holmes (2008, p.9) exemplifies the situational factor, such as the participant (who is speaking, who are they speaking to), the setting or social context (where are they speaking), the topic (what is it about), and so on. Thus, language has essential part of society and it is influenced also by gender.

In the society life, people are circled by knowledge of gender. According to Holmes (2008, p.157), the term gender is used to differentiate people according to socio-cultural behaviors such as speech. In addition, Tong (2009, p.51) exemplifies that "there

is a fact used by society as the foundation of constructing a masculine and feminine as gender identity". There are some distinctions between men's speech and women's speech. In general, men's speech was seen as logical, concise and dealing with important topics, whereas women's speech was rated as emotional, flowery, confused and wordy. This statement is supported by Lakoff's theory in Holmes (2008, p.297). She claims that, "a number of linguistic features were used more often by women than by men, because women often express uncertainty and lack of confidence in speech".

## **Spoken Language**

Spoken language is a language which is spoken orally and it is in form of sounds. Spoken language sometimes is called oral language. This language is produced in its spontaneous form. This statement is supported by Halliday (1985, p.46) "spontaneous conversation as the characteristic form of spoken language". In spoken language, most meanings are determined by the context. According to Tannen (1982, p.167) "spoken language represents phenomena as processes". On the other hand, spoken language tends to have a lower lexical density than written language. Furthermore, Tannen (1982, p. 195), adds, "spoken language is a form of communication in which people uses the mouth to create recognizable sounds."

Leech et al. (1982, p.136) explains that spoken language may afford to be less explicit as any communication because: firstly, it is accompanied by body language. Secondly, "the immediate physical environment can be referred to". Thirdly, participants share common knowledge. Finally, an immediate feedback is provided. Hence if there is a token of misunderstanding or incomprehension, the message may be clarified or repeated.

## Hedges

Hedges are also called hedging. Hedging has received much attention in relation to conversational rules as a mean to facilitate turn-taking, politeness, mitigate face-threats, but it is also considered a means of conveying vagueness purposely. Politeness and hedging have become forms of social interpretation of verbal and non-verbal behavior revolving around the concept of saving face. Thus, they play a crucial role in social interaction strategies. In language studies, hedging has come to designate a manifestation of language by means of which speakers take precautionary measures to protect themselves from the negative effect of their sayings or to protect themselves or their interlocutors from any harm to the concept of face caused by their utterances. Lakoff (1972, p.271) analyses hedges as, “words whose meaning implicitly involves fuzziness-words whose job is to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy”. He states that words and phrases manifest hedging power (like rather, very, in a manner of speaking) which sets some boundaries in how to interpret linguistic items as hedges. Lakoff (1972, p.213) adds hedges, “interact with felicity conditions for utterances and with rules of conversation”. Thus, setting the coordinates for interpreting hedges is manifestations which are conditioned by pragmatic factors.

Hedging represents a crucial aspect of language as the appropriate use of hedges reflects a high degree of efficiency in social interaction by demonstrating the ability to express degrees of certainty and mastering rhetorical strategies required under conversational circumstances: “Hedging refers to any linguistic means used to indicate either (a) a lack of complete commitment to the truth value of an accompanying proposition, or (b) a desire not to express that commitment

categorically.” (Hyland 1998, p.1). The study of hedging has been deepened over the past twenty years. Literature includes various works on the topic and various labels are used to denote this category, such as *softeners* (Crystal & Davy, 1975), *weakeners* (Brown and Levinson, 1978, 1987), *downgraders* (House & Kasper 1981), *compromisers* (James, 1983), *tentativeness* (Holmes, 1983), *understatement* (Hübler 1983), *evidentiality* (Chafe 1986), *downtoners* (Greenbaum et al. 1990), *diminishers / downtoners* (Biber & al.,1999), *stance markers* (Atkinson 1999).

Namasaraev (1997, p.67) identifies 4 parameters that characterize hedging strategies: (1) Indetermination – adding a degree of fuzziness or uncertainty to a single word or chunk of language; (2) Depersonalisation – avoiding direct reference by using “we” or “the authors” or some other impersonal subjects; (3) Subjectivisation – using I + think/ suppose, assume and other verbs of thinking with the purpose of signaling the subjectivity of what is said, as a personal view instead of the absolute truth; (5) Limitation – removing fuzziness or vagueness from a part of a text by limiting category membership.

A hedge is a mitigating word or sound used to lessen the impact of an utterance. Typically, Hedges can be adjectives or adverbs, but can also consist of clauses. It could be regarded as a form of euphemism.

Examples:

1. There might just be a few insignificant problems we need to address. (adjective)
2. The party was somewhat spoiled by the return of the parents. (adverb)
3. I'm not an expert but you might want to try restarting your computer. (clause)

Hedges may intentionally or unintentionally be employed in both spoken and written language since they are crucially important in

communication. Hedges help speakers and writers indicate more precisely how Gricean maxims (expectations of quantity, quality, manner, and relevance) are observed in assessments. For example,

1. All I know is smoking is harmful to your health.

In (1), it can be observed that information conveyed by the speaker is limited by adding all I know and as you probably know. By so saying, the speaker wants to inform that she is not only making an assertion but observing the maxim of quantity as well.

2. They told me that they are married. If the speaker only says that “they are married” and they do not know for sure if they are married, they may violate the maxim of quality since they say something that they do not know to be true or false. Nevertheless, by adding they told me that, the speaker wants to confirm that they are observing the conversational maxim of quality.

3. I am not sure if all of these are clear to you, but this is what I know.

The above example (3) shows that hedges are good indications the speakers are not only conscious of the maxim of manner, but they are also trying to observe them.

4. By the way, you like this car?

By using by the way, what has been said by the speakers is not relevant to the moment in which the conversation takes place. Such a hedge can be found in the middle of speakers’ conversation as the speaker wants to switch to another topic that is different from the previous one. Therefore, by the way functions as a hedge indicating that the speaker wants to drift into another topic or to stop the previous topic.

Lakoff, in most of her work on women and language, claims that women use hedges more frequently than men do. She even places hedges as one of the features in women’s talk. Holmes (2008) mentions that Lakoff’s analysis on the

hedges shows women do not have enough confidence when involved in a talk. Professor Skarda (cited in Eckert, 2003, p.394), however, presented examples of hedges such as *like, you know, I mean*, arguing that they do not specifically belong to female feature of talk.

Zimmerman and West (1975) propose the idea that hedges like *um, hmm, uh huh, yeah* are often used to indicate an active hearership, in that hearers continuously show interest in the speaker’s utterances. These hedges consequently overlap with the ongoing talk or subsequently occur after utterances produced by the speaker. In broadcast talk, the occurrence of hedges among the interactants is obviously inevitable. Adams and Hicks (2001) mention that the hedge *uh huh* is often vocalized and a nod concurrently occurs, which is either clearly or slightly shown. They also claim that the hedge functions as a ‘verbal encourager’ which is considered as helpful.

Male and female has many differences, it could be showed when they express something, for example in expressing their opinion about something. Lakoff suggested that women’s speech was characterized by linguistic features such as the following:

- a. Lexical hedge or fillers, e.g. you know, sort of, well, you see.
- b. Tag question, e.g. she’s very nice, isn’t she?
- c. Rising intonation or declarative, e.g. it’s really good.
- d. ‘Empty’ adjectives, e.g. divine, charming, cute.
- e. Precise color terms, e.g. magenta, aquamarine.
- f. Intensifier such as just and so, e.g. I like him so much.
- g. ‘Hypercorrection’ grammar, e.g. consistent use of standard verb forms.
- h. ‘Super polite’ forms, e.g. indirect request, euphemism.

- i. Avoidance of strong swears words, e.g. fudge, my goodness.
- j. Emphatic stress, e.g. it was a BRILLIANT performance.

Namasaraev (1997, p.153) states that, “There are nine types of lexical hedges according to its classification”. The table below shows language used in hedging according to its classification.

Table 1  
*Classification of Hedging*

Classification	Words	Sample Sentences
Modal auxiliary verb	will, must, might, can, should, could, would, may	‘Such a measure <i>might be</i> more sensitive to changes in health after specialist treatment.’
Lexical verb	appear, believe, assume, tend, suggest, estimate, think, argue, speculate, indicate, seem, propose, suppose	‘In spite of its limitations, the study <i>appears to</i> have a number of important strengths.’
Probability adjective	possible, likely, unlikely, clear, definite, certain, probable	‘ <i>It is likely to</i> result in failure.’
Noun	assumption, claim, probability possibility, estimate, suggestion,	‘ <i>We estimate that</i> one in five marriages end in divorce.’
Adverb	Practically, presumably, clearly, probably, conversely, possibly, perhaps, definitely, certainly, virtually apparently, completely	‘There is, <i>perhaps</i> , a good reason why she chose to write in the first person.’
Adverb of frequency	often, occasionally, generally, usually, sometimes, normally, frequently, always, rarely, never, seldom	‘ <i>Sometimes</i> it could produces a lot profit’
“If” clause	if true, if anything	‘ <i>If true</i> , our study contradicts the myth that men make better managers than women.’
Compound hedges	seems reasonable, looks probable, may be suggested	Such compound hedges can be double hedges ( <i>it may be suggested that; it seems likely that; it would indicate that; this probably indicates</i> ); treble hedges ( <i>it seems reasonable to assume that</i> ); quadruple hedges ( <i>it would seem somewhat unlikely that</i> ).
Fillers	you know, you see, by the way, sort of, well, hmm, uhm, uhh, uh..huh, all I know, I mean, yeah, like	<i>You know</i> , it can help them to fulfill the daily needs.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The data of this study were taken from the fourth semester students of English Education Program of Faculty of Teacher Training and Education of Bogor Ibn Khaldun University in expressing their opinions when they discussed some of the topics that would be used in debating. From the population, 30 students were taken as sample of this

research. The samples consisted of 15 female students and 15 male students. They were randomly taken as the sample. This research used descriptive-qualitative methods. Data were obtained by giving debating activity to the respondents. They were asked to work in a group which was divided in two groups, the first group was a pro group, and the second was the contrast group. They

gave some opinions related to the topic which was given by the writer. Every respondent opinion was recorded and analyzed. The data was classified based on the kinds of lexical hedges and respondent gender. The kinds of lexical hedges according to the language features, such as fillers, lexical verb, modal auxiliary verb, compound hedges, adverb, and adverb of frequency were classified. The total of lexical hedges was based on its features and all of the lexical hedges which were used by female respondents and male respondents were

counted. The female and male students' tendency in using lexical hedges was analyzed.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

After getting the data from female's and male's respondents, the writer then put it on the tables. Then, the writer separated the data according to their gender. In this research, the writer found the female and male respondents' tendency in choosing words when they expressed their opinion by using lexical hedges.

Table 2.

*Data of Lexical Hedges as Fillers*

Features	Female	Male
<b>1. Fillers</b>		
- Like	3	2
- Uhh	19	9
- Uhm	6	1
- Hmm	18	9
- Well	6	2
- You know	18	5
- You see	3	-
- By the way	1	-
- Sort of	3	-
- All I know	2	2
- I mean	6	5
- Yeah	15	8
- As I probably know	2	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>102</b>	<b>44</b>

Table 3.

*Data of Lexical Hedges as Lexical Verb*

Features	Female	Male
<b>2. Lexical Verb</b>		
- I believe that	3	-
- It is believed that	1	1
- I assume that	2	-
- It is assumed that	3	4
- Some people assume	1	-
- It is indicated that	1	2
- Tend to	2	1
- I suggest that	-	1
- It is suggested that	2	2
- I think	15	13
- It seems	2	-
- It seems like	3	1
- I suppose that	1	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>25</b>

Table 4.  
*Data of Lexical Hedges as Modal Auxiliary Verbs*

Features	Female	Male
<b>3. Modal Auxiliary Verbs</b>		
- Could be	-	2
- Can be	2	1
- Should be	1	-
- Would be	2	2
- May	5	3
<b>Total</b>	10	8

Table 5.  
*Data of Lexical Hedges as Compound hedges*

Features	Female	Male
<b>4. Compound hedges</b>		
- It may be impossible	1	-
- It will probably	3	1
- It may be started	-	1
- It may be suggested	1	-
- It might be suggested	1	-
<b>Total</b>	6	2

Table 6.  
*Data of Lexical Hedges as Adverb of Frequency*

Features	Female	Male
<b>5. Adverb of Frequency</b>		
- Sometimes	5	2
<b>Total</b>	5	2

The total of female and male respondents who chose the words of lexical hedges was different. Female respondents were mostly used fillers in expressing their opinions when doing the debate. Thus, it showed that female respondents were more active than male respondents in giving their opinion. It has been proved by the total of words produced by female and male respondents. In the table above, we could see also the differences of male and female respondents' tendency in choosing the words of lexical hedges. The total of data on the table above, which showed the score of female students in producing words of lexical

hedges, were 160 words. While the total of male students in producing words of lexical hedges were 81 words. Thus, there were the differences between female and male respondents' tendency in choosing the words of lexical hedges. It was proved by the total of lexical hedges used between female and male respondents in giving their opinion.

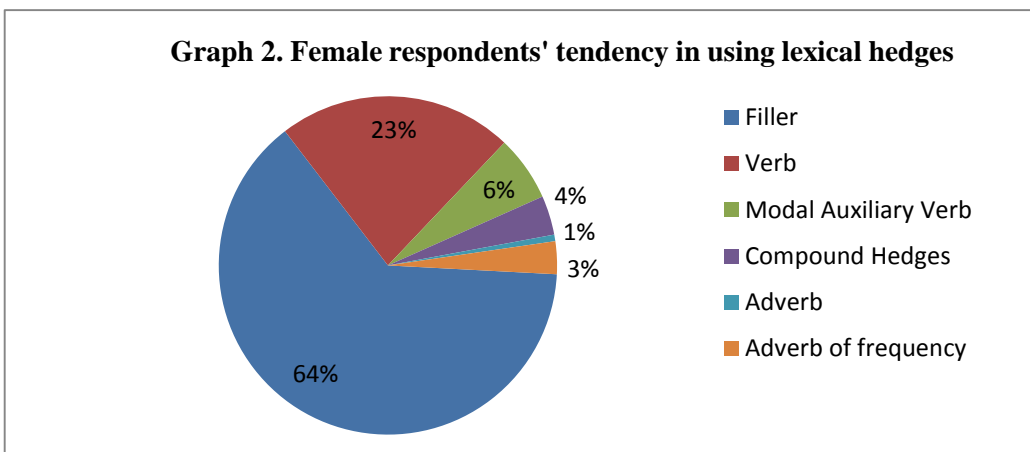
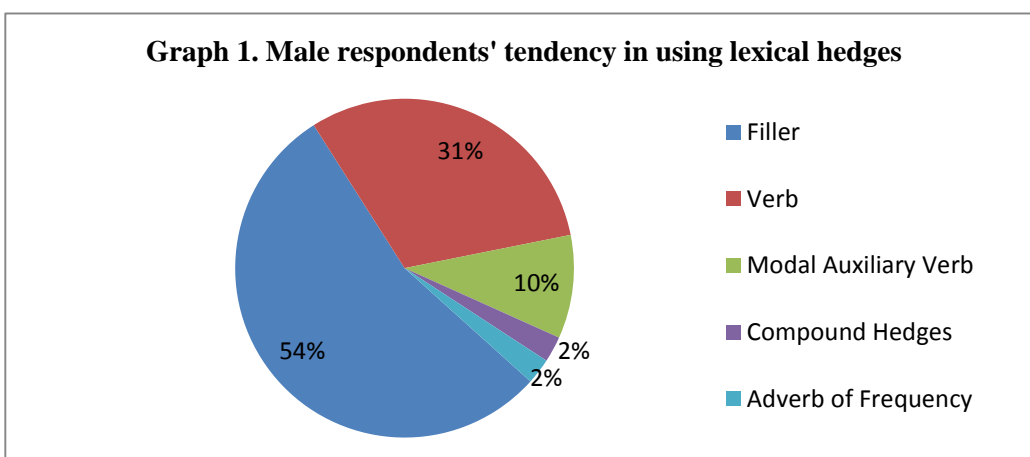
### Data Recapitulation

Debate was used as the media for the writer to get the data about the comparative study between female and male respondents. The writer focused the material on the use of lexical hedges between female and male respondents in

giving their opinion, because it could be used as a tool that showed the differences between female and male respondents in using lexical hedges. Observing some pictures was also used in this research to make the result accurately. From the data that has been collected, female respondents tended to choose the words of lexical hedges than male respondents. To know more about female and male respondents' tendency in choosing words

especially in using lexical hedges, the writer used the debate as a media to stimulate students both female and male students to express their opinion in using lexical hedges.

From the data collected, the writers put it into graphic which explained about female and male respondents' tendency in choosing lexical hedges in expressing their opinion.



The graphics above showed that male respondents were fewer than female respondents in choosing the words of lexical hedges. It indicated that female respondents were more productive in using the words of lexical hedges than male respondents in this case. Primary discussion on the research was about female and male respondents' tendency in choosing words of lexical hedges when they expressed their opinion. It also

explained about female and male respondents' words choices. The writers found the differences between female and male respondents in choosing the words of lexical hedges.

Based on the data collected, the female respondents' tendency used 102 words of lexical hedges as fillers, there are; *like, uhh, uhm, hmm, well, you know, you see, by the way, sort of, all I know, I mean, yeah, as I probably know*. While,



the male respondents' tendency used 44 words of lexical hedges as fillers, there are; *like, uhh, uhm, hmm, well, you know, all I know, I mean, yeah, as I probably know.*

Then, the female respondents' tendency used 36 words of lexical hedges as verb, there are; *I believe that, it is believed that, I assume that, it is assumed that, some people assume, it is indicated that, tend to, it is suggested that, I think, it seems, it seems like, I suppose that.* While, the male respondents' tendency used 25 words of lexical hedges as verb, there are; *it is believed that, it is assumed that, it is indicated that, tend to, I suggest that, it is suggested that, I think, it seems like.*

Next, the female respondents' tendency used 10 words of lexical hedges as modal auxiliary verb, there are; *can be, should be, would be, may.*

While, the male respondents' tendency used 8 words of lexical hedges as modal auxiliary verb, there are; *could be, can be, should be, would be, may.* Furthermore, the female respondents' tendency used 6 words of lexical hedges as compound hedges, there are; *it may be impossible, it will probably, it may be suggested, it might be suggested.* While, the male respondents' tendency used 2 words of lexical hedges as compound hedges, there are; *it will probably, it may be started.*

Next, the female respondents' tendency used 1 word of lexical hedges as adverb, there is; *perhaps.* But, the male respondents do not use word of lexical hedges as adverb. The last, female respondents' tendency used 5 words of lexical hedges as adverb of frequency, there is; *sometimes.*

While, the male respondents' tendency used 2 words of lexical hedges as adverb of frequency, there is; *sometimes.*

## **Discussion**

There are three types of sequential positions of lexical hedges in

the utterances as initial, medial, and final. Each sequence turns out to perform their function respectively. The initial position reveals that lexical hedges often indicate as initial marker of an utterance, self expansion, and utterance signal. While, the medial position reveals that lexical hedges often indicate elaboration most of the time and it also functions as a repair signal. The last type of sequential positions of lexical hedges is as final position. It often indicates as confirmation seeker and turn-handling signal into rising intonation. Dealing with the types of sequential positions of lexical hedges in the utterances, in this case, the writer analyzed from the data transcript that there were two sequential positions of lexical hedges in the utterances as initial and medial position which were shown by the respondents. In other words, there is no final position of lexical hedges used by the respondents.

### ***Hedges as Initial Position***

In this research, the writer analyzed from the data transcript that the words of lexical hedges such as; *I think, You know, You see, Some people assume that, All I know, It will probably, I believe that* occur in the beginning of the sentence as initial position of hedges.

However, being in the beginning does not always literally refer to be in the first word of utterance. Rather, the position refers to the beginning of a sentence level which might be preceded by unfinished utterances. The initial position does not literally have to be the first word being uttered. The instance indicates that the sequential positions of lexical hedges as final position occurred subsequently after a speaker's identity and it could be used to shift a topic and appoint a different speaker to take turn. The next instance of the initial position above indicates that it occurs exactly in the new sentence, after a period where can be in the beginning of talk. Thus, the initial position reveals that lexical hedges

often indicate as initial marker of an utterance, self expansion, and utterance signal.

### ***Hedges as Medial Position***

There are many words of lexical hedges which are used as the medial position according to the data transcript which is shown by the respondents. The writer analyzed that the words of lexical hedges such as; *uhh, uhm, hmm, yeah, like, well, sort of, by the way, I suppose that, I mean, as I probably know, it is indicated that, it may be suggested that, it is assumed that, it is believed that, sometimes, it seems, it seems like, may, should be, could be, can be, would be, tend to, perhaps, sometimes, it is suggested that* occur in the middle of the sentence as medial position of hedges.

The words of lexical hedges which are the most frequently used as the medial position can be in the middle of clauses, phrases, or even single lexical unit. It is often used as a means of stalling the time span as speakers are searching for the next upcoming words to utter. In addition, the function of the words of lexical hedges in the medial position as a repair and elaboration signals. Lexical hedges in the medial position serve as a repair signal which is not merely a problem of error but modification of syntactic level is also included. While, the writer also analyzed another function of the words of lexical hedges in the medial position such as; *uhh, uhm, hmm, yeah* as hesitation marker when the speakers are not sure about what they explain to the interlocutors.

### ***Hedges as Final Position***

One distinctive characteristic of the use of lexical hedges in final position is often followed by rising intonation. The function of the use of lexical hedges as final position as a confirmation seeker and turn-yielder when it marks the end of utterance. Similar to the initial position,

the final position does not merely refer to the end of utterance which leads to a new turn but it also refers to the end of a turn constructional unit within a stream of talk performed by the same speaker. Thus, the final position reveals that lexical hedges often indicate as confirmation seeker and turn-handling signal. In the data transcript, there is no final position of lexical hedges used by the respondents.

## **CONCLUSION**

The writer can conclude this research as follows: Females and males' tendency in using the words of lexical hedges have been shown on this research and the writer found that there are many differences of tendency between female and male respondents in choosing the words of lexical hedges in giving opinion. Female respondents tended to use more lexical hedges than male respondents. It was shown by female respondents produced words of lexical hedges are 160 words. In this case, the female respondents are most frequency used lexical hedges as fillers such as; *hmm, uhh, you know* in their utterances. While the total of male respondents in producing words of lexical hedges are 81 words. The male respondents are most frequency used lexical hedges as fillers such as; *I think, uhh, hmm* in their utterances. Female respondents had wide range variety in choosing words of lexical hedges while, the male respondents are not too productive in choosing the words of lexical hedges. It was shown according to the total of lexical hedges that they used in giving opinion in debate process. The female respondents tend to give longer opinion than male respondents about the topic of debate. Beside that, the male respondents tend to give a short and brief opinion than female respondents.

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