Are there gender differences in the use of questions in the sitcom *Friends*?

A case study of four episodes from 1994 and 2004

Finns det genusskillnader i användandet av frågor i tv-serien *Vänner*?

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Abstract

The main aim of this paper was to identify the form and function of questions used by the three female and three male characters in the sitcom Friends, in order to see whether there were any gender differences in the use of questions. Another aim was to see whether gender roles remain static over time in the series, from 1994 to 2004. Four episodes in total were used, two episodes from the first season and two from the last. The results clearly showed that the male characters asked more questions than the female characters which was the opposite of what research suggested. Out of the four main functions of questions (external questions, talk-questions, relational questions and expressive style questions), the male characters used the external and expressive style the most. This reflects what research says about men using questions more to show power and domination in conversations. Talk and relational questions were used more by the female characters, which agrees with previous research which shows that women use questions as a conversational tool more often than men. Over the ten-year period studied, there were no striking differences between the female and male characters when it came to the form of questions used. To sum up, the results turned out to agree to a great extent with previous research and the scripted dialogues seem to reflect authentic conversations surprisingly well.

Keywords: Form and function of questions, differences in question use, gender differences, gender roles over time

Sammanfattning på svenska

Syftet med detta arbete var att identifiera olika typer och funktioner av frågor som används av de tre kvinnliga och de tre manliga karaktärerna i den amerikanska TV-serien Friends, för att se om det fanns genusskillnader i användandet av frågor. Det andra syftet var att se om könsrollerna är statiska över tid i serien, från 1994 till 2004. Fyra avsnitt totalt har använts, två avsnitt från den första säsongen och två från den sista. Resultatet från denna studie visade att de manliga karaktärerna ställde fler frågor än de kvinnliga karaktärerna vilket var motsatsen till vad tidigare forskning påvisat. Av de fyra huvudtyperna av frågor (externa frågor, talfrågor, relationella frågor och uttrycksfrågor), så använde sig de manliga karaktärerna mest av de externa frågorna och uttrycksfrågorna. Detta speglar vad forskning säger om att män använder frågor för att visa makt och dominans i konversationer. Talfrågorna och de relationella frågorna, som användes mest av de kvinnliga karaktärerna, speglar också tidigare forskning då kvinnor använder frågor som ett verktyg i konversation mer än män. Över decenniet fanns det inga slående skillnader mellan de manliga och kvinnliga karaktärerna när man tittar på vilken form av frågor som användes. Sammanfattningsvis visade sig resultaten överensstämma i hög grad med tidigare forskning och de nedskrivna dialogerna verkar spegla autentiska konversationer överraskande väl.

Nyckelord: Form och funktion av frågor, skillnader i frågeanvändande, genusskillnader, genreroller över tiden
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1. Introduction and aims

Although sex is biological, the way women and men speak and behave is very much shaped by the society in which they live. Some researchers, like Madison et al. (2014:2) point out that there are different beliefs about this, saying both that there are no innate psychological differences and that sex differences are social constructions. Furthermore they explain how evolutionary psychologists argue that there are certain innate differences; e.g., males are more aggressive and take more risks, while women are more empathic because of their ability to bear children, which results in differences in, for example, professions in military and politics (Madison et al. 2014:2). Research in the area of sex differences can be traced back over 100 years, but at that time, the focus was more on, for example, the "fact" that men’s brains were more developed and had a greater cortex than women’s (Woolley, 1910:335). The real interest in research on gender differences, due to society, had its uprise in the 1970s. And as Mesthrie et al. (2009:213) put it, this research area is important for the study of language from a sociolinguistic point of view.

Language and gender is a topic that is of interest in its own right; it is also important because of what it can add to our understanding of language and how it works, and to the sociolinguistic study of language. (Mesthrie et al. 2009:213)

Since the uprise, this research area has developed. A noteworthy result of recent research is that gender differences in language have been found to be smaller with younger men and women than with older speakers (Trudgill, 2000:186). And if this is the case, gender differences might be found to have changed in just a decade. In order to find out about this, it is necessary to study the interaction between men and women at two different points in time. Ideally, such a study should be based on authentic interaction, but since it is not possible to find material of such interaction which could be compared, this investigation will instead be based on scripted material, namely episodes from the sitcom *Friends*. The differences in interaction that will be of focus in this study are the use of questions in conversations. Previous research has shown that questions function as a tool to keep the conversation going and it also gives the person asking the questions the control over the conversation (Aritz et al. 2017:163). The questions even control what the recipient is able to answer (Aritz et al. 2017:163). According to Newman et al. (2008:212), women use questions to a greater extent than men.
As already pointed out, the present study will thus focus on social interaction and the use of questions in the sitcom *Friends*. These dialogues are not authentic but scripted material and such material may or may not be similar to how language is used in society. They may also reflect the scriptwriter’s ideas about language use rather than how language is actually used in everyday interaction. However, since this sitcom is supposed to reflect everyday life, it should be quite close to reality when it comes to the dialogue and interaction. The main aim of the investigation is to identify the form and function of questions used by the six characters in Friends, three female and three male characters, in order to see whether there are any gender differences in their use of questions. A second aim is to see whether gender roles remain static over time in the series, and therefore, the use of questions in two episodes from the first season will be compared with how questions are used by the male and female characters in two episodes from the last season.

2. Background

In Section 2.1, definitions of *sex* and *gender* and the main differences between the two are explained. In Section 2.2, a brief survey of research in the area of gender differences in language will be provided. Section 2.3 will be similar to 2.2 but more specifically oriented towards gender differences in the use of questions. In the final section (2.4) the different forms and functions of questions that will be used in the method and analysis of the data from *Friends* will be explained.

2.1 Defining gender

The Merriam-Webster online dictionary (2017) defines *sex* as “either of the two major forms of individuals that occur in many species and that are distinguished respectively as female or male especially on the basis of their reproductive organs and structures.” And the Oxford online dictionary (2017) defines *gender* as “either of the two sexes (male and female), especially when considered with reference to social and cultural differences rather than biological ones.” It is important to know the difference between these two definitions. Wood and Dindia (1998:20) summarize the term *sex* as referring to biological sex, and *gender* as referring to the social construction of the sex, “a pervasive social category” as Weatherall puts it (2000:287). According to gender theory, the differences that exist between women and men are not innate but social constructions, and these “sex-roles” that exist are arbitrary and can, therefore, be replaced (Madison, et.al. 2014:2). Gender studies investigate things like power structure, how women’s and men’s status in society is based on the relationship of power, and also how social differences are constructed by different power relations (Söderlund & Madison, 2017:1094).
As the field of gender research has grown, so has the view of how much the differences really are based on social gender. Society has changed a great deal in the past century and what was considered “female” and “male” earlier might not be the same today. One very recent change is that there is an increasing recognition of transgender, people who do not identify themselves as either sex (Dwoskin et al. 2017:4). Gender is just one small part of the whole social context (Mesthrie et al. 2009:234) and it is important to remember that just because something might be more specific to women this does not mean “all women”, and saying so is just a “broad generalization” (Newman et al, 2008:212). Gender is just one aspect of who we are. It is a complex feature that changes all the time once we take part in different social interactions in different places. There are several different ways of being a woman and several different ways of being a man (Coates & Pichler, 2011:570).

Studies in the field of language and gender had a major growth in the 1970s. The studies started with a focus on “generalised gender differences” (Mesthrie et al. 2009:213). According to Mesthrie et al. (2009:213), the more society has grown aware of the issues of gender and gender differences, the more has this field drawn itself towards a sociolinguistic point of view. Today the focus is more on how everyone may use the language differently based on more than just gender, such as context and the relationship between speakers. There has been a realization that gender and other social categories such as sexuality, race, class, power, and authority work hand in hand (Mesthrie et al. 2009:234), as well as everyone’s own identity (Mesthrie et al. 2009:213). This is today called a “postmodern shift” in this research area (Mesthrie et al. 2009:233). Some researchers argue that a particular linguistic form or a special utterance can only construct gender if what the person is saying keeps “orienting to gender”; others claim that there is an indirect relationship between gender and the background assumptions that exist. Yet others argue that what people are saying and how they are acting are shaped by beliefs and social structures, and since these cannot always be found they may not be “oriented to gender” (Coates & Pichler, 2011:529).

2.2 Gender differences in language

*Communicative competence* is a term used to explain that social and cultural factors are important to incorporate into a linguistic description, meaning children have to know grammar, but they also need to learn appropriateness: when to speak, how to speak, when to be silent, and so on. Such communicative competence is necessary for people to function in society (Coates, 1993:106–107). And this is an area where research has found gender differences. Society has formed this competence of what is appropriate language use for women and for men (Coates, 1993:107).
Research has found a variety of differences in men’s and women’s language use. Women, for example, use longer sentences in both writing and speaking, they use hedges (for example “it seems like”) more often than men and they use phrases that communicate uncertainty in different ways, as in for example “I wonder if” (Newman et al. 2008:212-213). Men, on the other hand, take more turns in conversation, offer more opinions and use more words and locational references. They also use directives, ordering people to do something, more often, while women use questions to a greater extent (Newman et al. 2008:212-213).

Other researchers have focused on two different speech styles, the tentative speech style and the assertive speech style (Brownlow et al. 2003:121). Brownlow et al. (2003:121) have done a survey of previous research on these two language styles. A tentative speech style implies features that show uncertainty, politeness and warmth. It can also include hesitations and pauses. These features can show lack of knowledge and lucidity as well a lack of credibility, which also shows powerlessness in conversations. Markers of this tentative and powerless speech style have been found in language used by women and people with lower status. An assertive speech style, on the other hand, is much more direct and simple. A person with an assertive speech style often speaks more and uses more interrogative questions, all features that show powerfulness (Brownlow et al. 2003:121). Kollok et al. (1985:35) also found that people with higher status, often men, use interruptions more often than women and people with a lower status. Another thing Brownlow et al. (2003:122) found was that men pause and use more fillers than women. Fillers are words that are used in order to hold your turn in the conversation, showing the other participants that you are not done talking yet, which prevents them from speaking.

### 2.3 Research on gender differences in questions

Asking questions is believed to be a good way of seeking information or confirmation. However, in normal everyday conversation, questions are often used for other purposes. According to the data collected by Stivers (2010:2776), not even half of all the questions used were identified as questions that sought for information or confirmation. The conclusion Balogun (2011:57) could draw after her investigation was that a lot of the questions used were mainly used to show power. According to Balogun (2011:47), language is a strong instrument to use when showing domination and power, and “[t]he act of questioning is a strong indication of class and power in the society” (Balogun, 2011:47). Weatherall (2002:3) writes that “language reflects men’s power and social advantages and it also reflects women’s relative lack of power and their social disadvantage.” In order to avoid this
disadvantage, women have had to find strategies that help them in conversations and social interactions. One strategy, according to Newman et al. (2008:212), has been the use of questions. Questions often force the other participants to answer and therefore they keep the conversation going, and the people included in the conversation have to respond (Calnan & Davidsson, 1998:19). Men, on the other hand, use more declarative questions that function as directives, that tell people what to do (Newman et al., 2008:212).

An observation with 52 hours of recorded conversation, done by Fishman (1975), showed that the women asked questions almost three times more than what the men did (cited in West & Zimmerman, 2011:143). More recently, Aritz et al. (2017:175) found that women use questions that invite the contribution of others. Their data also showed that women used more challenging tag-questions when it came to decision-making in meetings. This implies that when women want to be heard in mixed gender groups they employ more features that show certainty and less of those associated with “less powerful speech”, such as uncertain tag-questions and hesitations etc. Coates (1993:123) says that women use interrogative questions more often than men. Research suggests that this might be due to women’s weakness in conversations, that they use interrogative forms to keep the conversation going, as a conversational tool. But while questions are used a lot by women (in this case, without power), they are also used by powerful participants, since questions are a powerful linguistic resource. The questions that are asked oblige the addressee to provide an answer, and not any answer; it also has to be a relevant one. So questions can be used in different ways and for different purposes. This means that even the same form of questions can have different functions. In some cases, according to Coates (1993:123-124), gender is the variable for the differences, but in other cases, it is social and occupational status. When speaking about language, Wood and Dindia (1998:21) suggest that perhaps it should not be called “gender differences” at all, maybe it should say “power differences” instead.

2.4 Forms and functions of questions
Coates (1993:123) mentions that even the same forms of questions can have different functions. This means that even if people use the same form of questions, they might use them differently and for different purposes. When talking about different forms of questions in the English language there are three primary types: polar questions, Q-questions and alternative questions (Stivers, 2010:2773). These will be explained in greater detail in Section 2.4.1, together with some examples. In Section 2.4.2, there will be an overview of the functions of different types of questions based on
2.4.1 Forms of questions

As mentioned above there are three primary forms of questions in everyday conversation in the English language. The most common question type is the polar question. This question type is usually answered with a simple yes or no. Polar questions can be divided into two categories, namely *interrogative questions* and *declarative questions* (Stivers, 2010:2773). The goal of interrogative questions is to seek information, get clarification, agreement or confirmation of some sort (Balogun, 2011:42). Interrogative questions end with a rising intonation, but they also need to be in the form of a question, with the operator placed before the subject (Stivers, 2010:2773) as in for example *Does Bill like tea or coffee?* The operator is the auxiliary verb (*do, be, etc.*) and the subject is the person or the thing that the question or statement is about. In the following examples, the subjects are *he, it* and *my husband*. There are several different kinds of interrogative questions: (1) yes/no-questions, (2) tag-questions, (3) exclamatory questions and (4) rhetorical questions. One example of each of these is presented in (1) — (4) (from Balogun, 2011:42–44).

1. Is he your brother? (Yes/no-question).
2. He doesn’t wear his uniform, does he? (Tag-question).
3. Wasn’t it a wonderful experience! (Exclamatory question).
4. Is my husband going to blame me? (Rhetorical question).

Question (1) is a yes/no-question since it only requires a simple *yes* or *no*-answer. The intonation at the end of question number (2) indicates if the tag-question is asking for some kind of information (a rising tone) or if it just wants confirmation (a falling tone). The exclamatory question in (3) mainly seeks confirmation and/or agreement from the hearer. It keeps the same question form as number (1) but an exclamatory mark instead of a question mark is used in writing. The speaker already has a strong attachment to what he/she says and just wants the hearer to respond. And the very last example, number (4), the rhetorical question, has the same characteristics as a statement. It is a strong, positive or negative statement but still in the question form, usually with a rising intonation. In that respect, such questions are similar to what can be referred to as *declarative questions*.

According to Stivers (2010:2773), declarative questions were the dominant type in spontaneous conversation in her study. Declarative questions can be used both with a rising intonation and with a falling one. They can both be used to form questions but the declaratives with a rising intonation are
the most common ones. The falling declaratives are mostly used as statements since it commits to the speaker him/herself (Gunlogson, 2002:124&130). “In example (5), the interrogative form is used (the operator is placed before the subject) and rising intonation is used, which makes it an interrogative question. Example (6) has the form of a declarative and since it has a rise in the intonation the speaker lacks knowledge and commitment to the content so the declarative commits to the interlocutor instead and is therefore used as a question. In example (7), on the other hand, the speaker has the knowledge about whether or not it is raining and the declarative is instead used as a statement.

(5) Is it raining?  (Interrogative)
(6) It’s raining?  (Declarative question)
(7) It’s raining.  (Declarative statement)

The second form of questions is called Q-questions or wh-questions. They contain words such as who, when, where, why and how (Stivers, 2010:2775). These questions are also of an interrogative type since they normally seek information. The interrogative words listed above usually come first when used in a question. Compared to the polar questions, the Q-questions seek more information and require a more detailed answer than just a yes or no, as shown in example (8) (from Balogun, 2011:43) and (9) (from Stivers, 2010:2775).

(8) Why are you not coming with me?
   - Because I have an assignment.
(9) How much does it cost?
   - Sixty-nine.

It is possible to answer with just one word, but the answer needs to be more detailed than in the polar questions. It is almost impossible to answer a Q-question with yes, no or just a simple mhm.

The third question form is the alternative question. The characteristic of an alternative question is the fact that it needs to contain two or more alternatives as in example (10) (from Biezma and Rawlins, 2015:451). In this case, the speaker searches for the answer to which any of the provided alternatives hold. The speaker shows no bias to either of the alternatives as more probable, just wants an answer to either of them (Rooy & Safarova, 2003:304).

(10) What would you like: coffee or tea?

An alternative question can have the same shape as a polar question. The characteristic that
distinguishes it from the other question type is the rising intonation, usually with a pitch accent (Biezma & Rawlins, 2015:451) as in example (11) (from Biezma & Rawlins, 2015:450).

(11) Does Bill like tea* or coffee*?  (Alternative question, with intonation and pitch)
(12) Does Bill like tea or coffee?  (Interrogative question)

Knowing how to separate these two is problematic and it is therefore necessary to understand the pragmatic distinction between them. The pragmatic distinction refers to what the person means with his or her sentence. If the addressee understands the pitches (*) in example (11), then he or she can understand that these two words are used as separate alternatives to choose between and therefore this sentence is used as an alternative question. It is necessary to know the role of intonation in these two cases since the intonation is what most clearly distinguishes the alternative question from the others (Biezma & Rawlins, 2015:451).

2.4.2 Functions of questions

Depending on the context when any of these question types are used, they can be divided into function categories. This study follows Freed and Greenwood’s (1996:15) categorization of question functions: 1) external questions, 2) talk questions, 3) relational questions and 4) expressive style questions.

1. External questions are questions that seek for factual information. The information it seeks is external to the circumstances and setting of the conversation. Included in this category are invitations (Do you want to go to the movies tonight?), deictic\(^1\) information (Did you hear from her?) and factual queries (What’s today’s date?).

2. Talk questions solicit information about the ongoing conversation. The questions that fall under this category are questions asking for clarification, confirmation or repetition, such as You mean you asked him out?, Oh, he’s remarried?, What did you say? and Really?.

3. Relational questions are designed to continue the flow of the conversation by using the shared relationship and knowledge between the speakers. Examples of these kinds of questions are Do you remember my math teacher?, Do you know what I mean? and Do you know another thing I was going to say?

4. Expressive style questions are questions that contain information already known to the speaker.

\(^1\) Deixis = “The way in which the reference of certain elements in a sentence is determined in relation to a specific speaker and addressee and a specific time and place of utterance” (Matthews, 2007).
In a case like this, the speaker is conveying the information to, instead of searching for it from, the hearer. Questions that fall under this category are didactic questions, rhetorical questions, self-directed questions, questions used for humor and questions in reported speech. Some examples of these are: What's she going to do about it anyway?, Why'd I say that?, Who knows? and Should we sing?

Freed and Greenwood (1996:14-15) found that questions fall under these four categories. What categorizes them depends on what functional use a question has in the conversation, what kind of information it seeks and what kind of information the speaker might convey. Questions are complex and diverse in conversational functions and should therefore not be treated as equivalent and identical. Freed and Greenwood (1996:15) emphasize that previous studies that have categorized questions as one single unit should be looked at once more.

3. Methods
The main aim of this study was to identify the form and function of questions in the sitcom Friends and to see whether there were any gender differences in the use of them. The second aim was to see if gender roles remained static over a decade. The data chosen for this study were scripted material from the sitcom Friends, which will be presented further in Section 3.1. In Section 3.2, how the analysis of the questions was performed will be explained in greater detail. In Section 3.3 there will be a short summary of some difficulties encountered when categorizing the data.

3.1 Material
Since it was not possible to retrieve authentic data for this study, scripted material from the sitcom Friends was used instead. This sitcom was chosen since it represents the everyday life of six characters, and since it has the same number of male and female characters, three of each. Four episodes in total were chosen, two from the first season in 1994 and two from the last season in 2004. The scripted material was found on the internet, on a page called ”Springfield! Springfield”.

The four chosen episodes were 14. The one with the candy hearts and 15. The one with the stoned guy from the first season and 3. The one with Ross's tan and 4. The one with the cake from the last season. The episodes were at first chosen randomly, but before they were used they were checked to make sure that every character was involved in every episode. Once the first episode of each season

2 https://www.springfieldspringfield.co.uk/episode_scripts.php?tv-show=friends
was chosen the second episode of that season was the one that followed next. This was done because if any of the characters did not get very much speaking time in one episode, they might get more in the consecutive one. Otherwise there was no specific reason for choosing them in that order. Each episode is about 23 minutes long which gave a total time of one and a half hour of collected data.

3.1.1 Characters

It is important for the analysis of the results to have some background information about the characters, so this will be provided in this section. In the sitcom *Friends*, we get to follow the everyday lives of six characters in their mid-twenties, Rachel, Monica, Phoebe, Chandler, Ross, and Joey. They live in New York City and spend a lot of their time at the coffeehouse on the ground floor of their apartment building.

The three female characters are called Rachel Green, Monica Geller and Phoebe Buffay. Rachel is a spoiled woman who goes from living off her father’s money to being a roommate with Monica and working as a waitress in the coffeehouse in order to stand on her own two feet and break free from the spoiled life she used to live. She has an on/off relationship with Ross throughout the series but finally, they end up together and have a baby daughter. In conversations Rachel is talkative and engaging. The second character is Monica, who works as a chef at her own restaurant. Monica is notorious for her obsessive cleanliness. Later on in the series, she starts dating Chandler in secret, and once the secret is out they get married and at the very end of the show, they adopt two babies. Monica is also very talkative, and she likes to say what is on her mind as she believes that she is always right. In conversations she is therefore always interested and dedicated. The third character is Phoebe. Phoebe is a woman who had a very troubled upbringing. Her father abandoned her, as well as her twin sister and their mother. When Phoebe and her sister were very young their mother killed herself, and Phoebe lived on the street when she was only 14 years old. In the sitcom, she works as a masseuse and plays crappy guitar at the coffeehouse on the side. She has never had a serious relationship, but in the very last season she marries a man named Mike. Phoebe is not a very good listener or contributor in conversations like the other two women. She is very distant, sometimes in her own little world, and the words that come out of her mouth may have nothing to do with what was previously said; even when she is engaged in the conversation she is not the one

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3 The description of the characters is from my own knowledge and observation after having watched all the episodes from all the seasons several times.
moving the conversation forward.

The male characters are Chandler Bing, Ross Geller and Joey Tribbiani. Chandler uses humor and sarcasm as a defense mechanism and has serious commitment issues until he falls in love with Monica and marries her. It is never clear what he does for a living, but it has something to do with computers. His sarcastic and comical personality makes him always very dedicated to what is said around him so that he can come up with a fun response. Ross is Monica’s older brother. Ross works as a paleontologist at a museum in the beginning and as a professor later on in the series. In the final season he has been divorced three times. He has had a crush on Rachel since high school, they have had an on/off relationship over the years, they have a baby together and in the end, he finally gets back together again with Rachel, the woman of his dreams. Ross is a good contributor in conversations and a good listener. The last character is Joey. Joey is very sweet and kind but not very bright. He works as an actor and is constantly looking for a job. He loves food and women but in the sitcom he never has a relationship that lasts longer than a month. He is a bit like Phoebe in some ways, also a bit distant, which might have something to do with the fact that he is not the brightest one of them all. What comes out of his mouth can also be weird and irrelevant, but he is still more engaged in conversations than Phoebe is.

3.2 Identifying the form and function of questions

The model used for identifying the form of questions is the one presented in Section 2.4.1. Each question encountered in the script was marked with a certain color: declarative questions (blue), interrogative questions (red), Q-questions (purple) and alternative questions (yellow). Once the four episodes were analyzed with colors based on their form, all the questions were gathered in a new document. In this document, all the six characters were listed, each with the four different question forms underneath, and then all the questions were copied and pasted under the name of the character and under the category to which it belonged. This was done for every character and every question type, as well as for 1994 and 2004, in order to see the differences over time. Example (13) shows how this was done in more detail, with only one example under each category of form.
(13) Chandler 1994:

**Interrogative:**
- Can we get a bottle of your most overpriced champagne?

**Declarative:**
- Tell me it's you and me “we”?

**Q-question:**
- How can I dump this woman on Valentine's Day?

**Alternative:**
- Another drink? Some dessert? A big-screen TV?

Once this was done, the scripts were analyzed again while the episodes were watched, in order to identify the function of the questions, regardless of their form (interrogative, declarative, Q-question or alternative), based on the four function categories suggested by Freed and Greenwood (1996:15). In this case, all the questions were given a number from 1–4 in the document depending on which category they belonged to: 1) external questions, 2) talk questions, 3) relational questions or 4) expressive style questions, which is shown in example (14).

(14) Chandler 1994:

**Interrogative:**
- Can we get a bottle of your most overpriced champagne? (1. External question)

**Declarative:**
- Tell me it's you and me “we”? (2. Talk question)

**Q-question:**
- How can I dump this woman on Valentine's Day? (4. Expressive style question)

**Alternative:**

Out of context, the questions could be taken to perform different functions, but by taking the context into consideration it was possible to determine the function of the question. This could be by listening to the intonation of the utterance and by hearing the interlocutor’s response. The function of questions became the headlines in a new document, one for each character, and the questions could easily be copied and pasted underneath the functional label.

(15) Chandler 1994:

**External question:**
- Can we get a bottle of your most overpriced champagne?

**Talk question:**
- Tell me it's you and me “we”?

**Relational question:**
- Any contact?

**Expressive style question:**
- How can I dump this woman on Valentine's Day?
Below some examples will be given of how the function of questions was determined. A typical example of an external question is (16).

(16) Ross: Wanna come over and join us?
Carol: No, I’m fine.

Ross is on a date with a woman and invites his ex-wife to join them. The external question has the most straightforward function of asking for information and invitations are included in this category.

A talk question that solicits information about the on-going conversation is shown in Rachel’s query in example (17).

(17) Chandler: I have an appointment with Dr. Robert Pilman, career counselor-a-go-go! I added the “a-go-go”.
Rachel: Career counselor?

In this example, Rachel wants to know more about why Chandler is going to see a career counselor, so she uses a talk question to solicit more information about it.

A relational question is used to keep the flow of the conversation and an example of this is Monica’s question in (18).

(18) Rachel: I do not know what's wrong with us. We've kissed before and that's been great. But this time it was leading somewhere and I was very aware of the fact that it was Joey touching me.
Monica: You guys have been friends forever. Remember the first time that you kissed Ross, how weird that was?

Rachel is dating Joey and she cannot stop slapping his hand away as soon as he starts to touch her and she turns to Monica for help. The relationship and shared knowledge between Monica and Rachel makes it possible for Monica to keep the conversation going by using the shared knowledge of the history between Ross and Rachel.

Example (19) is an interrogative question uttered by Chandler. This question is an expressive style question since it is a rhetorical question and used for a comical effect.
Chandler: Was it formerly owned by a blond woman and some bears?

Monica: So, anyway. I'm cooking dinner for him Monday night, you know. Kind of like an audition.

This is an interrogative question that follows the pattern of an information-seeking question, but from the context it is clear that this is not a question that Chandler wants an answer to. Instead it is used for comical effect, which makes it an expressive style question. The only response he receives is laughter from the other friends and Monica’s comment afterwards, where she uses “so, anyway” as a way of ignoring what he just said in order to continue with what she was originally telling them.

3.3 Problems of categorization

The categorization of the function of questions was problematic in some cases. Some questions did not seem to belong to any of the four categories. The most common problem was with the tag-questions since the tag is the only part that is actually asking a question, as in Ross’s utterances in example (20).

(20) Ross: 1. I just don't think I'm a dirty-talking kind of guy, you know?
2. Let’s just stick a pin in it, okay?

After reading it several times it felt like the tag belonged to the function of relation, since it checks if the person it refers to understands the question. One example from Freed and Greenwood (1996:15) on this function is “do you know what I mean?”, and the tags feel like shortenings of this utterance, so they were categorized as relational questions.

There were cases when the questions seemed to belong to more than just one of the categories, and it was hard to decide which one to pick. This was most problematic when the question was used for comical effect, but still served as a question that received an answer. In any other setting and situation these questions might function just as ordinary questions, but in many of the cases in the sitcom they functioned more as questions used for humor. Since the sitcom Friends is a comedy it was hard to know when the function of real questions ended and the function of questions used for humor began. Some examples of this are provided in (21) (uttered by Chandler), a character who uses humor to a much greater extent than the other characters.
Questions used for humor is one category in the expressive style function. In all the cases presented in example (21) the background audience are laughing and all the questions could be categorized in the expressive style function. What eventually had to be the factor that turned it into either an information-seeking question or a question used for humor was the response it received. The first question did not receive an answer at all, only laughter from the audience and an irritated look from Ross, so this one was categorized as an expressive style question. The second question received a *yep* from Ross and a lot of laughter from the audience, but since it still was a question that received an answer it was categorized as a talk question that solicited confirmation from the interlocutor. Also the third question received a detailed response from the interlocutor which, despite the irony in his voice and the laughter from the audience, was categorized as an external question, since it was clear in the context that Chandler still would like to know the answer to the question. The fourth and final question was often used as a real question in the sitcom, but in this situation it was not, and was therefore categorized as an expressive style question instead. Freed and Greenwood’s model is quite complex but after reading the questions out loud several times and reading it together with the previous utterance in the ongoing scene as well as hearing the response, they could be placed in the most suitable category.

4. Analysis and results

In the four episodes, a total number of 295 questions were identified. Section 4.1 will focus on the form of the questions while Section 4.2 will present the quantitative results of the function of questions in comparison to previous research. Section 4.3 will be a discussion of the results.

4.1 Question form

This section will focus only on the form of the questions and the number of lines the characters uttered in the four episodes. Section 4.1.1 shows the overall results of which question form was the most common. It will also show the differences between the two years. Section 4.1.2 compares the use of questions and their forms by the six characters.
4.1.1 Overall results

Table 1 shows the quantified results of the forms of questions used in the four episodes. Out of the 295 questions, there were only two alternative questions. This result turned out to be quite similar to Stivers’ data (2010:2773); she found only eight alternative questions out of 328 questions in total. The question form used the most frequently in this study was interrogative questions which corresponds to 47% of all the questions used, almost half of the total number. Declarative questions were used 21% of the time and Q-questions 32%. The two alternative questions were used only in 1994, and declarative questions were slightly more frequent in 1994 than in 2004. Interrogative questions were used about the same in the two years, whereas the ratio of Q-questions increased slightly.

Table 1. Total number of questions per question form in four episodes from *Friends* (1994 and 2004)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Interrogative questions N</th>
<th>Interrogative questions %</th>
<th>Declarative questions N</th>
<th>Declarative questions %</th>
<th>Q-questions N</th>
<th>Q-questions %</th>
<th>Alternative questions N</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interrogative and declarative questions are subtypes of polar questions (see Section 2.4.1). If these two categories are collapsed there is a total of 67% polar questions. According to Stivers (2010:2773), polar questions are the dominant type in conversation which turned out to be the same in this study. Figure 1 shows the results of the present study compared to Stivers’ results.

Figure 1. Comparison between Stivers’ percentage and this study’s percentage.
If we also compare which type of polar questions (interrogative and declarative) was the most common one, the results are no longer similar to Stivers, as shown in Table 2. In her study, declarative questions were the most common ones, whereas in this study interrogative questions were more common. In Stivers’ study 67% were declarative questions and 33% interrogative (Stivers, 2010:2773). The present study had 32% declarative questions and 68% interrogative questions.

Table 2. Comparison of the ratio of interrogative and declarative questions, in Stivers’ study and the present study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Interrogative</th>
<th>Declarative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stivers’ study</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This study</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Stivers (2010:2773) mentioned that interrogative questions are usually treated as the most neutral and common question type of polar questions. Declarative questions are usually casual in their tone, which might be why they were the most common question type in spontaneous and neutral conversations, which was the focus in her investigation. Since the present study used scripted material and not spontaneous conversation, this might explain the difference in the results.

4.1.2 Individual results for each character

Table 3 is a survey of the total number of questions used by each of the characters in 1994 and in 2004. Chandler used the most questions and landed on a total of 20%. Rachel and Ross used 18% each of all the questions in the four episodes. Monica used 17% of all the questions, Joey used 16% and Phoebe got the lowest score, only 11%. Rachel’s ratio of questions increased in 2004, whereas Monica and Phoebe used questions less frequently. When it comes to the male characters, Chandler used a similar ratio of questions in 1994 and 2004, while Ross’s use of questions increased slightly and Joey’s ratio decreased a little. These results might due to the number of lines the characters were provided in the episodes.
Previous research mentioned that gender differences are decreasing and that there are other aspects that need to be taken into account (see Section 2.1). One important aspect is that there may be individual differences. In Tables 4 and 5, the number of each of the four forms of questions used by each character in 1994 and 2004, respectively, is provided in order to see if the results can be linked to each character’s personality (see Section 3.1.1).

Table 3. Total number of questions used by each character in 1994 and 2004

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Rachel N</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Monica N</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Phoebe N</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Chandler N</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Ross N</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Joey N</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>295</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Total number of questions used by each character in 1994

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Interrogative questions N</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Declarative questions N</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Q-question N</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Alternative questions N</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monica</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phoebe</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chandler</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ross</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joey</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5. Total number of questions used by each character in 2004

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Interrogative questions N</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Declarative questions N</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Q-question N</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Alternative questions N</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monica</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phoebe</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chandler</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ross</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joey</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Although there is a difference in the ratio of questions used by each character, what is particularly striking is the fact that Phoebe used fewer questions than the other characters. These results may be linked to each character’s speaking time in the sitcom. If Phoebe speaks a lot less than the others in the sitcom, it would not be surprising if she uses fewer questions. Table 6 shows the number of lines each character had in the four episodes.

Table 6. Total number of lines spoken by each character in the four episodes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Episode 14 N</th>
<th>Episode 14 %</th>
<th>Episode 15 N</th>
<th>Episode 15 %</th>
<th>Total 1994 N</th>
<th>Total 1994 %</th>
<th>Episode 3 N</th>
<th>Episode 3 %</th>
<th>Episode 4 N</th>
<th>Episode 4 %</th>
<th>Total 2004 N</th>
<th>Total 2004 %</th>
<th>Total N</th>
<th>Total %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monica</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phoebe</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chandler</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ross</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joey</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>343</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>232</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>450</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>793</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6 shows that Chandler has the most lines and Phoebe has the least number of lines both in 1994 and in 2004. The results are similar to those in Table 4 and 5, which shows that Chandler uses the largest number of questions and Phoebe the least.

Trudgill (2000:186) mentioned that gender differences in language are decreasing, and that there is a smaller difference in language use between younger men and women today compared to older men and women. The results from this study were in line with what Trudgill said (2000:186) but not in terms of question use, but in the number of lines the male and female characters had. In 1994 the male characters had 190 lines altogether compared to 220 lines in 2004; in percentages, their ratio is 55% in 1994 and 49% in 2004. The female characters, on the other hand, had 153 lines in 1994, a ratio of 45% and 230 lines in 2004, a ratio of 51%. Table 7 shows a comparison between number of questions and number of lines more clearly.
Table 7. Comparison between number of questions and number of lines.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of questions</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>295</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of lines</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>793</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question use in percent</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of questions</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>295</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of lines</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>793</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total percentage of question use</td>
<td>39 %</td>
<td>28 %</td>
<td>40 %</td>
<td>44 %</td>
<td>35 %</td>
<td>37 %</td>
<td>37 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall, the male characters used questions more frequently than the female characters. When the two years are compared, it turns out that the ratio of questions in comparison with speaking time was fairly similarly divided in 1994 (35-44%), whereas the differences were much larger in 2004, with ratios between 21 and 49%. Two characters stand out as having decreased their ratio of questions very much, namely Phoebe and Joey, whereas Chandler and Ross have increased their ratio of questions by 10 percentage points between the two years. The more frequent use of questions by the male characters might be a way for them to show power and domination in the conversations they are part of. However, in order to be able to determine that it is important to look at the function of the questions used.

4.2 Question function

This section will focus on the function of questions. Section 4.2.1 presents the overall results and includes a comparison between the use of questions by the female and male characters. Section 4.2.2 shows the individual results for each of the characters.

4.2.1 Overall results

Table 8 shows the quantified results of the function of questions. The most frequently used question function was the relational question which was used 29% of the time. Talk questions were used 26% of the time, expressive style questions 25% and external questions 20% of the time. The results over the years differed between the functions. In 1994, talk questions had the highest ratio (30%) while
external questions, relational questions and expressive style questions had a similar ratio (22-24%). In 2004, relational questions were the most frequent, followed by expressive style questions, talk questions and external questions.

Table 8. Total number of questions from each question function found in the sitcom in 1994 and 2004

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>External questions</th>
<th>Talk questions</th>
<th>Relational questions</th>
<th>Expressive style questions</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>295</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Previous research mentioned that women use questions as a conversational tool more often than men (see Section 2.3). The two functional categories that are mostly used to keep the flow of the conversation are talk questions and relational questions. External and expressive style questions, on the other hand, are not as important as conversational tools. Table 9 presents the total number of questions based on their function and the gender of the speaker.

Table 9. Total number of questions categorized by function and gender.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>External questions</th>
<th>Talk questions</th>
<th>Relational questions</th>
<th>Expressive style questions</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female characters</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male characters</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>295</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9 shows that the female characters used more of the question types that function as conversational tools. They used talk questions 30% of the time and relational questions 34% of the time. The male characters have a more evenly distributed percentage of the functional categories. It is noteworthy that the expressive style questions have a higher ratio than the other categories. Expressive style questions give the speaker an opportunity to display knowledge and express personal views and opinions. This is in line with what research said about men having a social advantage (Weatherall, 2002:3) and being able to show domination and power through conversations (Balogun, 2011:47). The results are also similar to what Freed and Greenwood (1996:19) found. In their study, women used relational questions 29% of the time and the men 16%,
compared to this study’s results where female characters used it 34% of the time and the male characters 25%. They also found that women used expressive style questions 26% while the men used it 34% of the time. The present study got an even larger difference with only 18% for the female characters and 31% for the male. The use of questions in this small case study still reflects the results found in studies of authentic interaction.

4.2.2 Individual results for each character

As mentioned before, gender differences in language use are said to be decreasing but it is important to examine individual differences as well. Table 9 showed the total number of questions used by all the female and all the male characters on a group level. Tables 10 and 11 are surveys of the total number of questions used by each of the characters in 1994 and in 2004 categorized by function. This is done in order to see if the results can be linked to their personalities and not only to their sex.

Table 10. Total number of questions categorized by function used by each character in 1994.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>External questions</th>
<th>Talk questions</th>
<th>Relational questions</th>
<th>Expressive style questions</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monica</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phoebe</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chandler</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ross</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joey</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 11. Total number of questions categorized by function used by each character in 2004.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>External questions</th>
<th>Talk questions</th>
<th>Relational questions</th>
<th>Expressive style questions</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monica</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phoebe</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chandler</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ross</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joey</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As shown in the tables above, expressive style questions are used much more often in 2004 than in 1994, and the difference between the male and female characters is no longer as large. Especially noteworthy is the fact that the ratio of expressive style questions has increased considerably for the three female characters. In 1994, the differences between the male and female characters’ use of expressive style questions were quite large, but they have been more or less evened out in the episodes from 2004. Also, there has been an increase in the use of relational questions. In 2004, the ratio of relational questions was still higher for the female than for the male characters, but the differences between the two groups and between the individual characters were not as pronounced. For instance, in 1994, Phoebe used only 12% relational questions compared to 54% for Monica. In 2004 these figures were 43 and 42%.

The rest of this section will present a few examples of question function, beginning with external and expressive style questions, which were the two types used most frequently by the male characters.

(22) Joey: Hey, what do you say we move this onto the likes of the couch?  
Rachel: I say cheesy line, but okay. (Episode 3, 2004)

Example (22) is an external question used by Joey. He and Rachel have been on a date and when they get back to their apartment they start making out. Joey uses his “cheesy line” as an invitation for him and Rachel to continue what they are doing on the couch instead.

Example (23) is another external question uttered by Ross. This is an external question because it is a factual query.

(23) Ross: So is Emma awake yet?  
Rachel: No, it’s still nap time. (Episode 4, 2004)

The friends are having a birthday party for Ross and Rachel’s daughter Emma and when Ross arrives at the apartment he asks Rachel if Emma is awake, which is a factual query. The response he receives is a direct and a straightforward answer to the question.

Example (24) is an expressive style question uttered by Ross to a woman working at a solarium.

(24) Glenda: So, let me explain how this works. You go into the booth and…  
Ross: Let me stop you right there Glenda. Does it look like this is my first time?  
(Episode 3, 2004)
Ross does not receive an oral response from Glenda, all he gets is a frightened look. Since Ross is really tanned when asking this question he is implying that it should be obvious to her that this is not his first time getting a spray-on-tan. Therefore the question is a rhetorical one and furthermore, an expressive style question, which shows that Ross has the upper hand in the conversation.

(25) Ross: I went to that tanning place your wife suggested.
Chandler: Was that place the sun? (Episode 3, 2004)

In example (25), Ross has been to the spray-on-tan place and when he walks into the apartment where Chandler and Monica are they are stunned by the sight of Ross. The answer, in the form of a question, that Chandler utters is both used as a rhetorical question and a question used for humor. He does not expect an answer from Ross and all he receives is an upset look from him.

The female characters used more talk questions and relational questions, both of which are questions that function as conversational tools. This supports what previous research has said, that women use questions to keep the conversation going more than men (see e.g. Coates, 1993:123). Examples of such questions from the sitcom are provided in (26) — (29).

(26) Amanda: I’m so happy you two are friends again.
Monica: When were we not friends?
Amanda: Well, it was 1992. (Episode 3, 2004)

In example (26), Monica and Phoebe are seeing their old friend Amanda. After Amanda’s utterance, Monica does not understand what she is talking about and seeks for clarification and confirmation to that remark by using a talk question. A talk question solicits more information about the ongoing conversation, which Monica receives in the last utterance. The question used by Phoebe in example (27) also seeks for clarification and is hence another talk question.

(27) Monica: Chandler will call in a few minutes with an emergency
Phoebe: Okey, what kind of emergency gets us both out of here?
Monica: What do you think of Mike and Chandler being in a car accident? (Episode 3, 2004)

Monica and Phoebe do not actually want to meet Amanda, so Monica comes up with a plan that will get them both away from where they are, an excuse to leave Amanda. In response to Monica’s utterance, Phoebe asks for more information about what she said, which Monica provides her with in the last utterance.
Example (28) shows a relational question that Rachel uses in the car when she and Ross are discussing a birthday-cake that did not turn out the way it was supposed to.

(28) Rachel: Look, you made it into a bunny. How did you do that?
Ross: Well, I just made these two things cheeks, and then I split this to make ears.
(Episode 4, 2004)

The bakery they ordered the cake from made a huge mistake and turned the birthday-cake into a more erotic motif instead of a bunny. Rachel and Ross never made it to the bakery to return the cake so instead, in the car, Ross started changing it himself. Rachel’s question keeps the flow of the conversation and she would not be able to ask that kind of question if she and Ross did not share knowledge about the cake. Therefore her question is a relational question.

Example (29) is also a relational question used by Monica when Phoebe returns to the apartment faster than expected, after having left for work not long ago.

(29) Monica: What about your massage client?
Phoebe: I just felt so bad missing this. So I just slipped him a little something, you know. (Episode 4, 2004)

Since Monica knows Phoebe left for work because she had a massage client, and since she knows that she should not be home from work already she uses a relational question, since they share this knowledge together. The response Monica receives from Phoebe shows that the question she used was a good way of continuing the conversation.

Although these examples demonstrate the use of the four types of questions by showing how the male characters used external and expressive style questions and how the female characters used talk and relational questions, the results clearly show that all the four functions of questions are used by all six characters.

4.3 Discussion of results
Research suggested that women use more questions in conversations than men (Newman et al. 2008:212). This was not the case in this study. Since gender is only part of the whole social context it is important to look also at other aspects. As it turns out, the number of questions used by male and female characters in this study is more a result of the characters’ roles and personalities in the sitcom. Phoebe is a character who is not as outgoing as the others; as a result she did not use as
many questions and did not take part in as many conversations as the other characters. Chandler, on the other hand, is a front figure who always wants to say something funny and who is engaged in conversations. This can help explain why he uses so many questions and participates in many conversations. In the present study, individual differences turned out to be more important than gender when it came to the form and number of questions.

When it comes to the function of questions, on the other hand, there was a greater difference. Research discussed in Sections 2.2 and 2.3 indicated that there are differences in language use between men and women, and between powerful and powerless people, which in some cases is the same thing. Questions that have the function of asking for facts and information that are outside the circumstances and conversational context, and that display knowledge and express personal views and opinions, are questions that are not doing much for the ongoing conversation and context and belongs to the assertive speech style. The features of this speech style is to talk more and use more interrogative questions, all which shows powerfulness in conversations. The questions that have this function are external and expressive style questions. These question functions have characteristics that can show the social advantage and powerful position that men possess in society. The male characters in this study used 5 percentage points more of the external questions and 26 percentage points more of the expressive style questions than the female characters. In this case, and despite the fact that this was scripted conversations, a gender difference was found.

Furthermore, Section 2.3 presented research which showed that women often have a disadvantage in conversations due to their disadvantage in society. They have had to find strategies in order to be heard in conversations, and therefore they use questions more to keep conversations going and to elicit more information from the interlocutor. These question functions are talk and relational questions. The female characters in this sitcom asked more questions from both these functional categories than the men did. The results from this study support what previous research says, that women use questions more as a conversational tool. In summary, several gender differences in the use of questions were found in the present study. Even if there were individual differences between the characters, the big picture is that the male and female characters used questions in line with what previous research has found. However, as Freed and Greenwood (1996:21) said, it is important not to overgeneralize and characterize all women as insecure speakers engaged in cooperative speech since this might just as well pertain to men. In their study it was clear that it was the type of talk that affected the language form, not the gender or the sex of the speakers. In this study it is hard
to know since it was scripted material.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to identify the form and function of questions and to see whether there were any gender differences in the use of them in four episodes from the sitcom *Friends*. The results turned out to agree to a great extent with previous research, and the scripted dialogue seems to reflect authentic conversations very well. When it comes to the form of questions, the ratio of polar questions compared to Q-questions and alternative questions were almost exactly the same as in Stivers’ investigation from 2010. When it comes to the function of questions, the similarities with previous research were even more noticeable. The results showed that the male characters used a larger ratio of the questions used to demonstrate power compared to the female characters (i.e. external and expressive style questions). Likewise, the female characters used questions as a conversational tool to a larger extent than the male characters (i.e. talk questions and relational questions).

The second aim was to see if gender roles remained static over a decade. What was found was that in the year 2004 the number of lines and speaking time for each character was more equivalent than in 1994. What also was found was that in 2004, the female characters still used fewer questions than the male characters did, even if they had more lines. Trudgill (2000) said that gender differences are decreasing in language, and these results reflect that in the sense that the characters are given a more equivalent amount of speaking time in 2004 compared to 1994.

The present study is predominantly quantitative, but by using a limited amount of data, the episodes could be analyzed in depth, which is a strength in this study. However, a larger number of episodes might have had an impact on the results, so the decision to use only four episodes is also a weakness of the study. If more time had been available, more episodes would definitely have been analyzed. Therefore, one idea for further research is to see if the results would turn out similar if more episodes were analyzed. It would also be interesting to put a greater focus on the characters’ personalities. Another interesting idea would be to do a similar study but on other sitcoms, both older and more recent ones. What would also be an interesting idea would be to look at the function of questions in same-sex and mixed-sex conversations. Johnson (2008:322) shows that women in same-sex conversations talk mostly about their feelings and relationships with others, themes that agree mostly with relational questions, while men focus more on themes of superiority and
aggression, which agrees mostly with external and expressive style questions. When conversations took place in mixed-sex situations the topics were changed between the sexes. Men talked more about themselves and their feelings while women did not talk as much about home and family. It would therefore be interesting to see if the differences found in the present study would change when the gender of the interlocutor is taken into account.
References


