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Female chatterbox? It's a myth and we can put a lid on it, say scientists

Mark Henderson, Science Editor, and Richard Mabey

She is one of the loudest stereotypes of popular culture, famous for dominating conversation with what Chas and Dave described as “more rabbit than Sainsbury’s”.

The female chatterbox who never lets men get a word in edgeways, however, is nothing more than a myth, according to research. Contrary to common belief and even to scientific assertion, women do not talk more than men.

The first rigorous study exploring the verbosity of men and women has found both sexes equally capable of irritating jabber. The typical woman speaks an average of 16,215 words a day, while an average of 15,669 words pass the lips of men, a difference so small it is not statistically significant.

The most loquacious people of all, indeed, tend to be men, but men are also the most taciturn. All three of the biggest talkers who took part in the research were male, the most prolific of whom yakked his way through 47,000 words in a day. The most effusive woman managed a mere 40,000.

At the other end of the spectrum, one man spoke an average of just over 500 words each day. There were nine men who spoke fewer than 2,000 a day, compared with only four women.

As an average of 16,000 words are spoken each day, people who talk at 120 words per minute — the speed at which the BBC’s Huw Edwards reads the news — would end up speaking for a little more than two hours of the 17 they typically spend awake.

The Little Britain character Vicky Pollard, by contrast, speaks at 330 words per minute, and would get through the average daily word allocation in just 49 minutes.

The findings, from a team at the University of Arizona, overturn a notion that is not only popular with the public, but which has also found its way into scientific research.

A book published last year, *The Female Brain*, by Louann Brizendine, a neuroscientist at the University of California, San Francisco, claimed that women use 20,000 words a day compared with just 7,000 for men, and the same statistics have been quoted widely by the media and even by marriage-guidance counsellors.

Some of these reports were seen by Jamie Pennebaker, Professor of Psychology at the University of Texas, who was surprised by the figures. He researches language use among men and women, and was sure that he would have been aware of so large a difference.

Professor Pennebaker already had the evidence he needed to investigate the matter, in the form of recordings of almost 400 students he had accumulated between 1998 and 2004. He then

teamed up with a former student, Matthias Mehl, of the University of Arizona, to pore over the data.

In their previous work, Professor Pennebaker and Dr Mehl had asked five groups of students in the US and one in Mexico to wear microphones that recorded snatches of their conversations throughout the day. Although they were told that the devices recorded at random, they actually operated for 30 seconds every 12½Science, showed no significant differences between men and women. “Whatever people might think, the stereotype is wrong,” Professor Pennebaker said. “What is interesting about this study is that we found nothing at all. It’s unusual in science for a study that finds nothing to generate such interest. It overturns a notion that has become part of the cultural mainstream.”

He said that, as all the participants were college students, it was possible that older age groups would behave differently, though he thought it unlikely. “It might be that once guys get to 30 or 40 they run out of things to say,” he said. “But I don’t think so.”

The stereotype, Professor Pennebaker said, might result from differences in what men and women said, and when they said it. “We do have evidence that women use many more personal pronouns, such as he, she and I, while men use more articles — a, an and the,” he said. “That suggests women are talking about people and men are talking about things.

“There’s also literature that suggests when there is marital conflict men tend to clam up and women tend to talk a lot.”