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The role of gender in the perception of politeness in Russian requests: Findings from two experiments

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Introduction



This study compares the results of two sociolinguistic experiments investigating the **perception of politeness** in the speech of men and women in Russian.

It examines whether linguistic gender stereotypes and expectations about politeness norms tend to influence participants' evaluations of identical utterances.

Introduction



The focus is on **requests**, intended broadly as instances of talk in which another person's assistance or cooperation is solicited. Requests are particularly subject to **discursive conventions** and **social expectations**.

Previous research (Zemskaya et al. 1993; Mills 1999; Mills 2003) has shown that, in line with traditional gender ideologies, men tend to be considered more **direct and assertive** in interaction, whereas women are often supposed to be more **polite, cooperative and indirect**, especially when requesting the interlocutor to do something.

Exp.1: Aim and RQs



To investigate linguistic gender stereotypes and their effect on the perception of *linguistic politeness* in Russian

- (1) Do certain linguistic choices tend to be associated with a particular gender?
- (2) Do gender stereotypes tend to affect participants' perception of politeness? Are identical requests evaluated differently depending on whether they are associated with a man or a woman?

Exp.1: Methods

Two online questionnaires, containing 19 requests **presented in written form**. The utterances were derived from the transcriptions of two corpora of Russian spoken language (*Odin Rechevoy Den'* and *Rech' Moskvichey*).

In the **main** questionnaire (Q1) participants were asked, for each request, to **guess the speaker's gender** and evaluate the **degree of politeness** on a 5-point scale. This served to examine both linguistic gender stereotypes (RQ1) and politeness perception depending on imagined gender (RQ2).

To further explore RQ2, an **auxiliary** questionnaire (Q2) was designed. It included the same requests as Q1 (in the same order), but in this case participants **only** evaluated the **degree of politeness**. No gender-guessing task or reference to gender (control group).

Exp.1: Participants (1)

251 participants (125 completed Q1, 126 completed Q2)

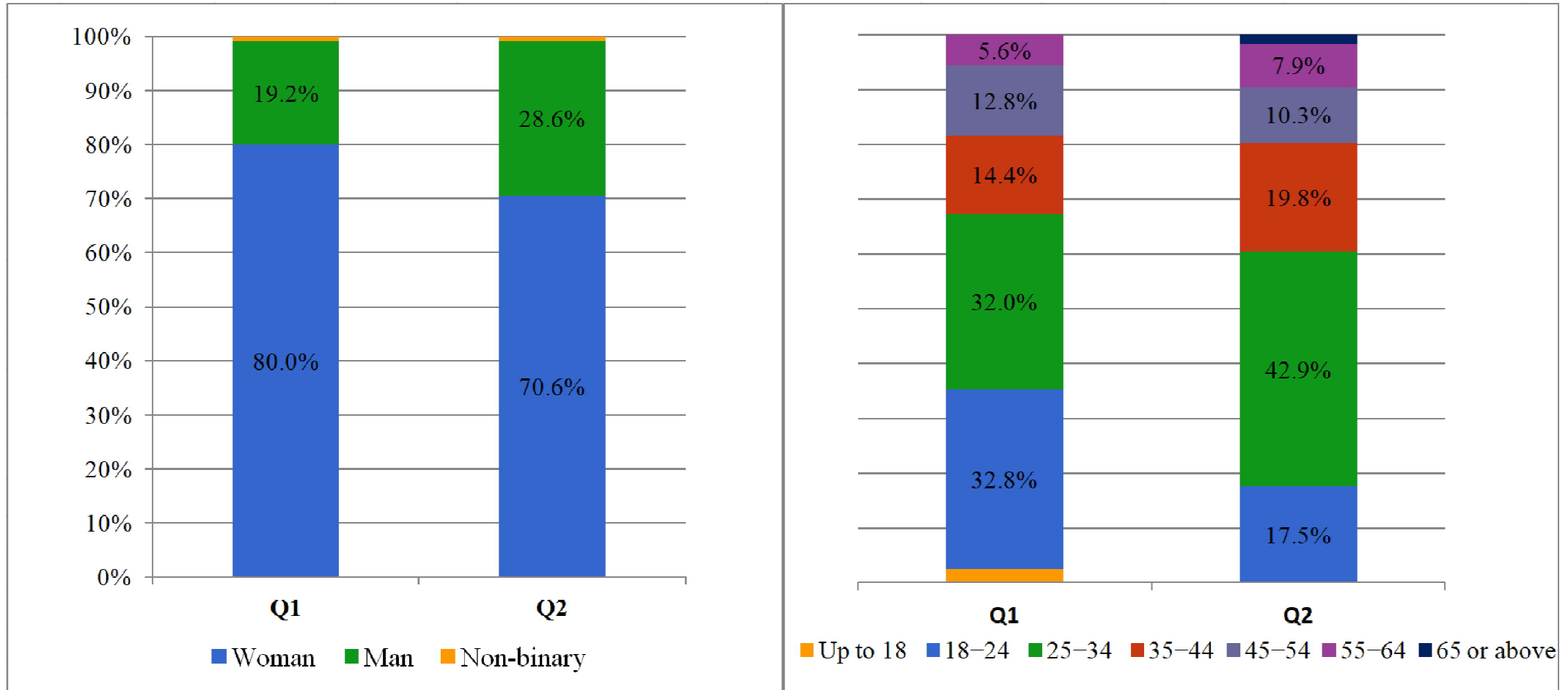


Figure 1. Gender and age distribution in Q1 and Q2.

Exp.1: Participants (2)

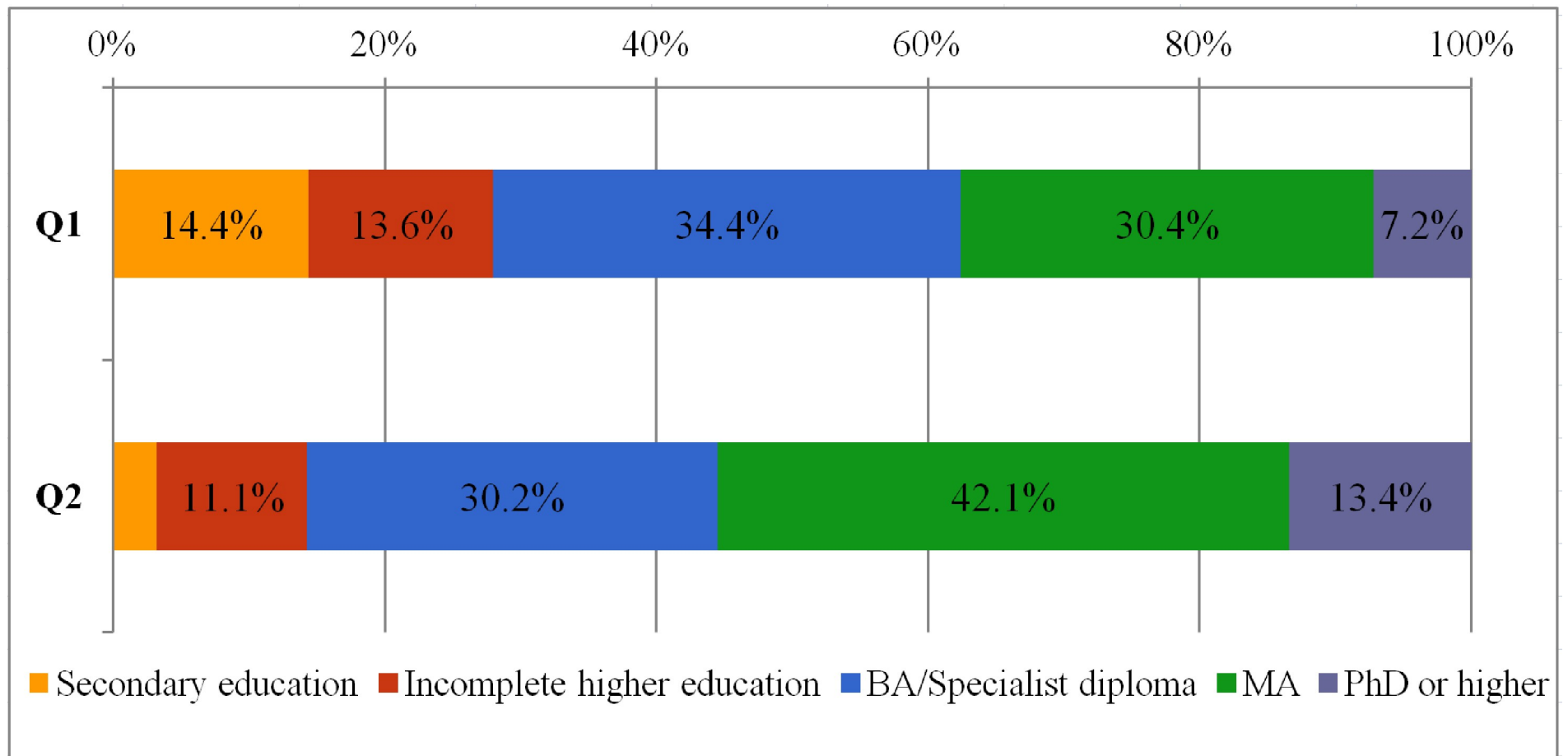


Figure 2. Participants' educational background in Q1 and Q2.

Exp.1: Participants (3)

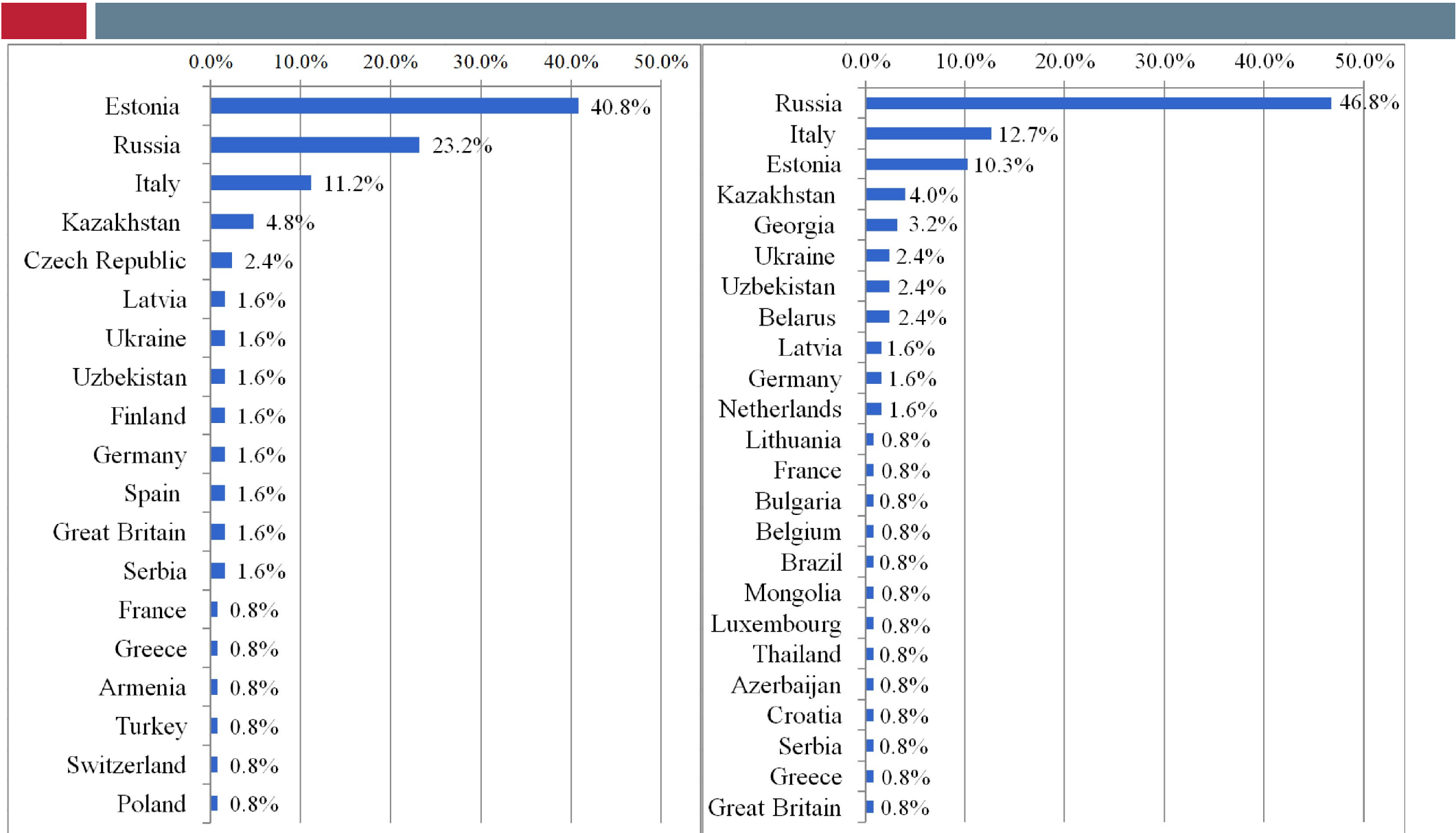


Figure 3. Distribution of participants by country in Q1 and Q2.

Exp.1: Participants (4)

Languages used on a daily basis:

Russian 94.4%

English 59.2%

Estonian 35.2%

Italian 15.2%

Ukrainian 8.8%

German 4.8%

French 4%

Spanish 3.2%

Finnish 2.4%

Polish 1.6%

Czech 1.6%

Latvian, Lithuanian, Greek,
Chinese, Georgian, Uzbek,
Armenian, Romanian, Turkish,
Japanese, Kazakh 0.8% (each)

Russian 96%

English 53.2%

Italian 17.5%

Estonian 7.9%

Ukrainian 4%

German 3.2%

French 4%

Spanish 4%

Georgian 4%

Uzbek 3.2%

Dutch 1.6%

Belarusian 1.6%

Tajik 1.6%

Latvian, Lithuanian, Greek, Portuguese, Bulgarian,
Arabic, Chinese, Kazakh, Serbo-Croatian, Tatar,
Mongolian, Kyrgyz, Abkhaz 0.8% (each)

Exp.1: Results (RQ1)



Direct, unmitigated requests (**stereotypical masculinity**) were consistently assigned to men, whereas indirect formulations containing diminutives, mitigation markers, hesitations and hedges (**stereotypical femininity**) to women.

(Уходя на работу)

"Закрой за мной! Ну давай. Пока!"

(Leaving for work)

"Close the door behind me! Alright. Bye!"

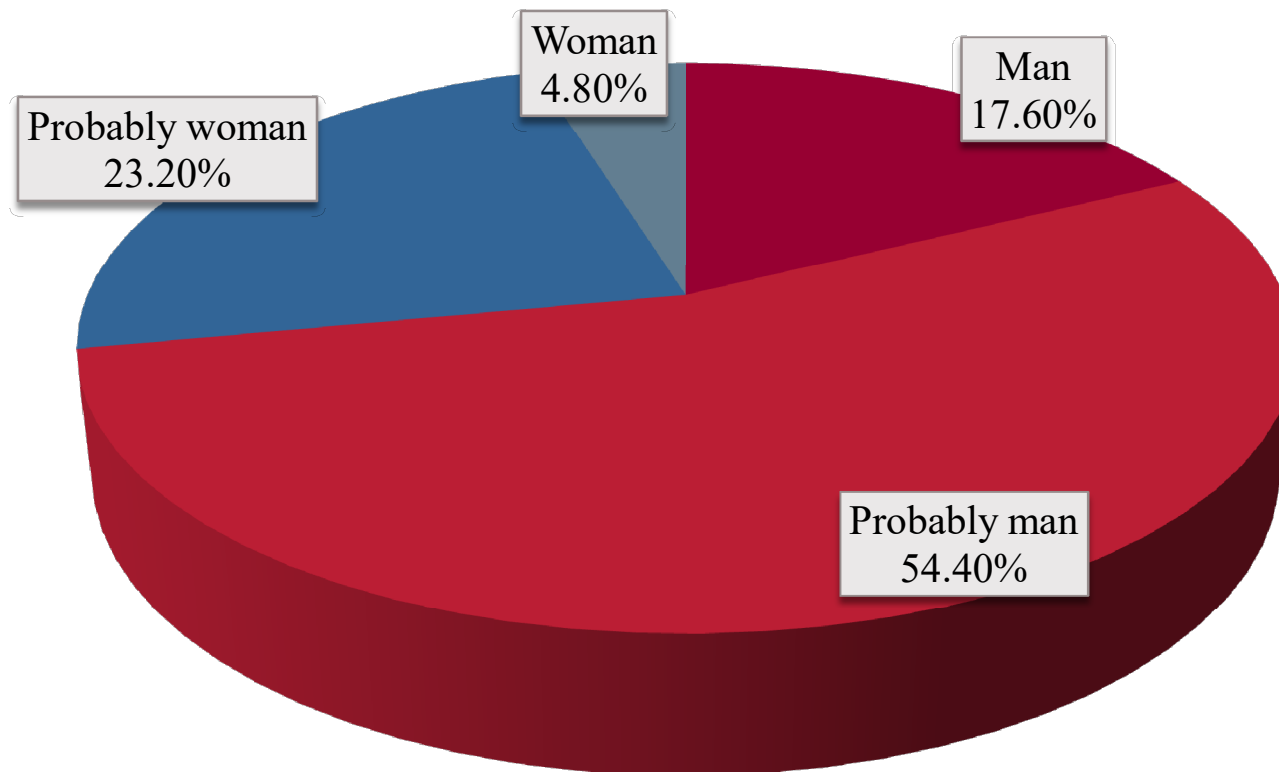


Figure 4. Example of request mainly associated with a male speaker in Q1

(Телефонный разговор с ИТ-специалистом) "Алексей, Вы извините ради бога, но мне Максим сказал что вы еще пока здесь в Питере. У меня один вопросик, буквально минутку, я думаю, займет. У нас тут вот компьютер, который внизу у аналитиков... У нас сейчас просто оперативная очень работа, нам через пять дней надо группу выслать на заказ... Вот, мы обрабатываем информацию и он... у нас конечно сверки... тормозит. Вот учитывая, что Марина аналитик... Что можно сделать [с компьютером]?"

Aleksey, excuse me for god's sake, but Maksim told me that you are still here in St. Petersburg. I have one little question, it will take literally a minute, I think. We have a computer which is downstairs in the analysts' office... We have right now some very urgent work, in five days we have to send a group for an order... So we are processing information and it... we obviously are checking... slows down. Well considering that Marina is an analyst... What can be done [with the computer]?

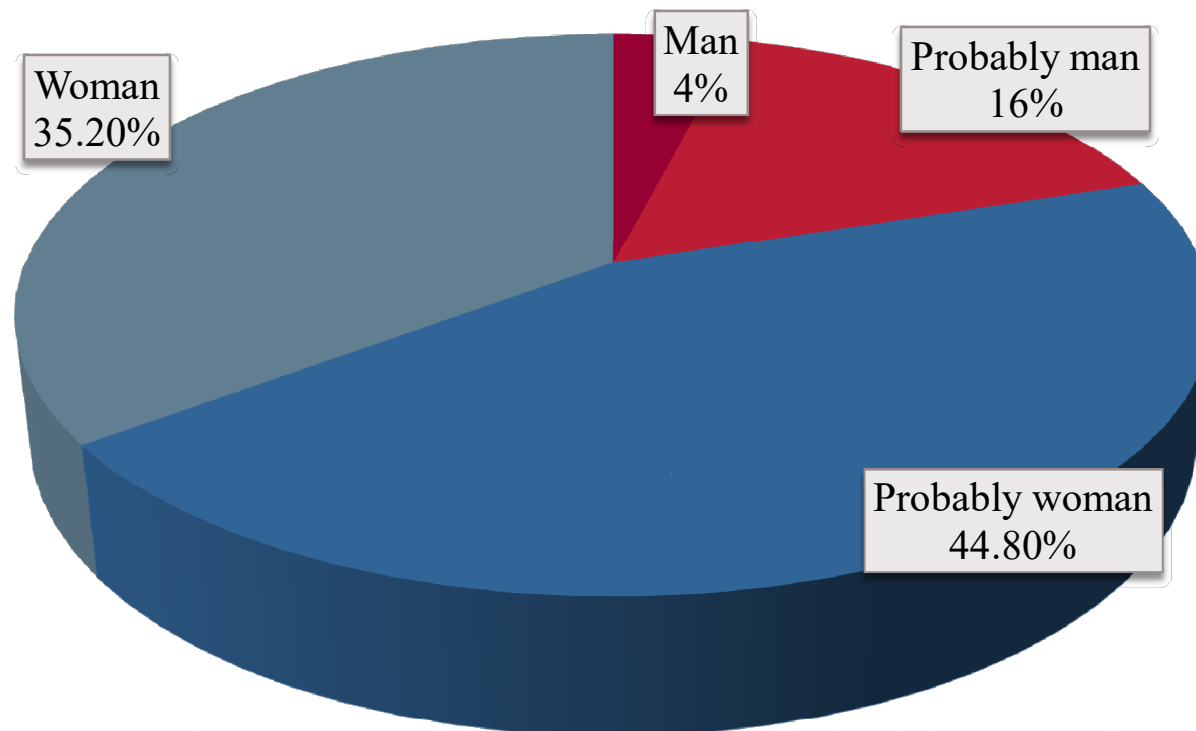


Figure 5. Example of request mainly associated with a female speaker in Q1

Exp.1: Results (RQ2)

Participants' evaluations of politeness: mean scores

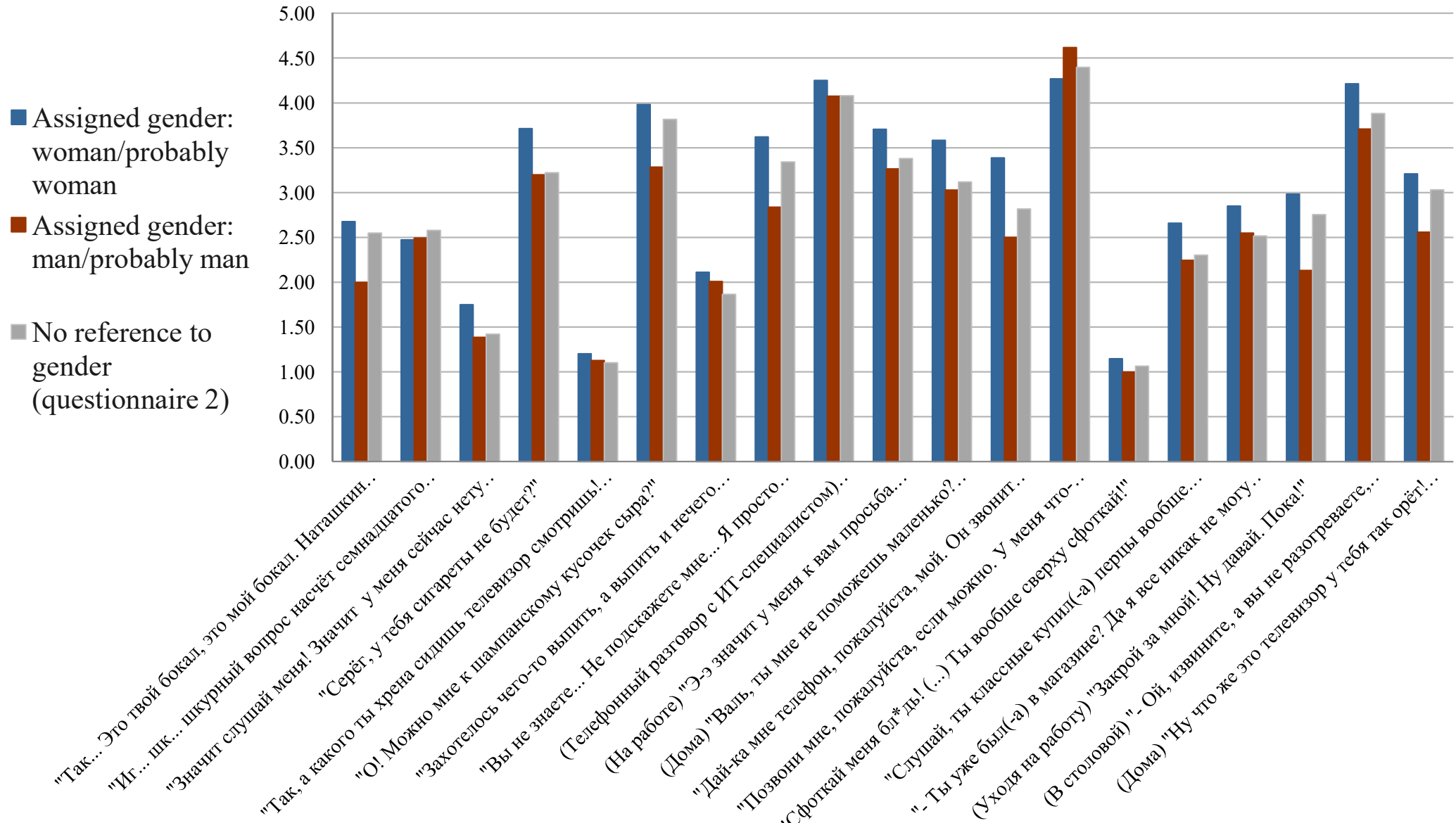
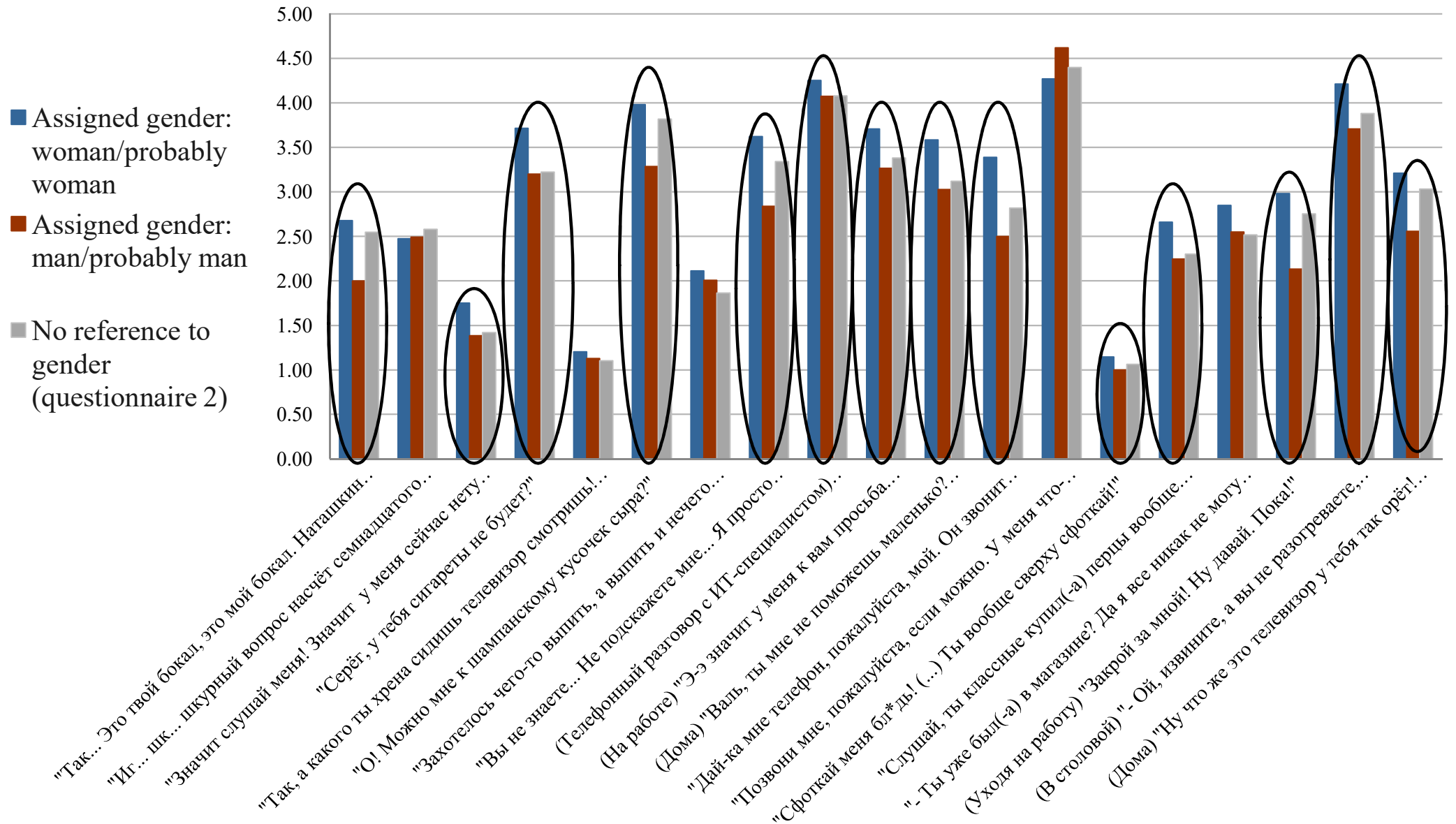


Figure 6. Mean politeness ratings

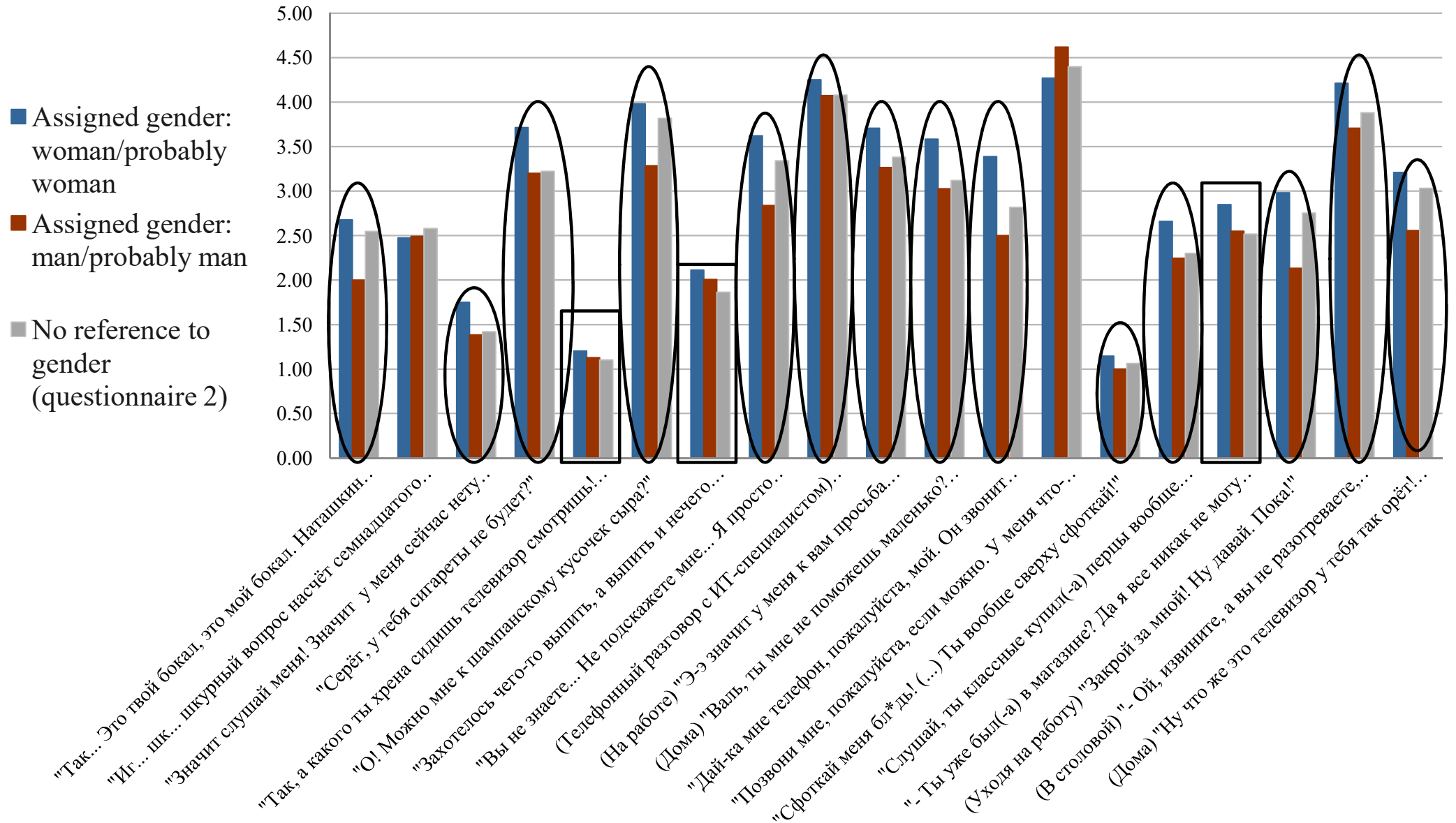
Exp.1: Results (RQ2)

Participants' evaluations of politeness: mean scores



Exp.1: Results (RQ2)

Participants' evaluations of politeness: mean scores



Exp.2: Aim and RQ



The second experiment shifted the focus from imagined speakers to **real voices**.

The aim was to investigate whether formally identical utterances are evaluated differently depending on whether participants hear a male or a female voice.

Do female-voiced stimuli tend to be rated as more polite than male-voiced stimuli (in line with the findings of the first experiment)?

Exp.2: Methods



The study employs a method inspired by the verbal-guise technique (see Dragojevic & Goatley-Soan 2022) to elicit evaluations of formally identical utterances produced by male and female speakers.

12 utterances from the first experiment were recorded **in two versions**, each by a male and a female native speaker, matched for sociolinguistic background.

Two versions of the questionnaire were created so that utterances voiced by female speakers **in one version** were voiced by male speakers **in the other**, and vice versa (6 FV and 6 MV – each voice appears only once).

Between-subjects design: participants heard only one version of each utterance.

Exp.2: Participants (1)

226 participants (113 completed Q1, 113 completed Q2)

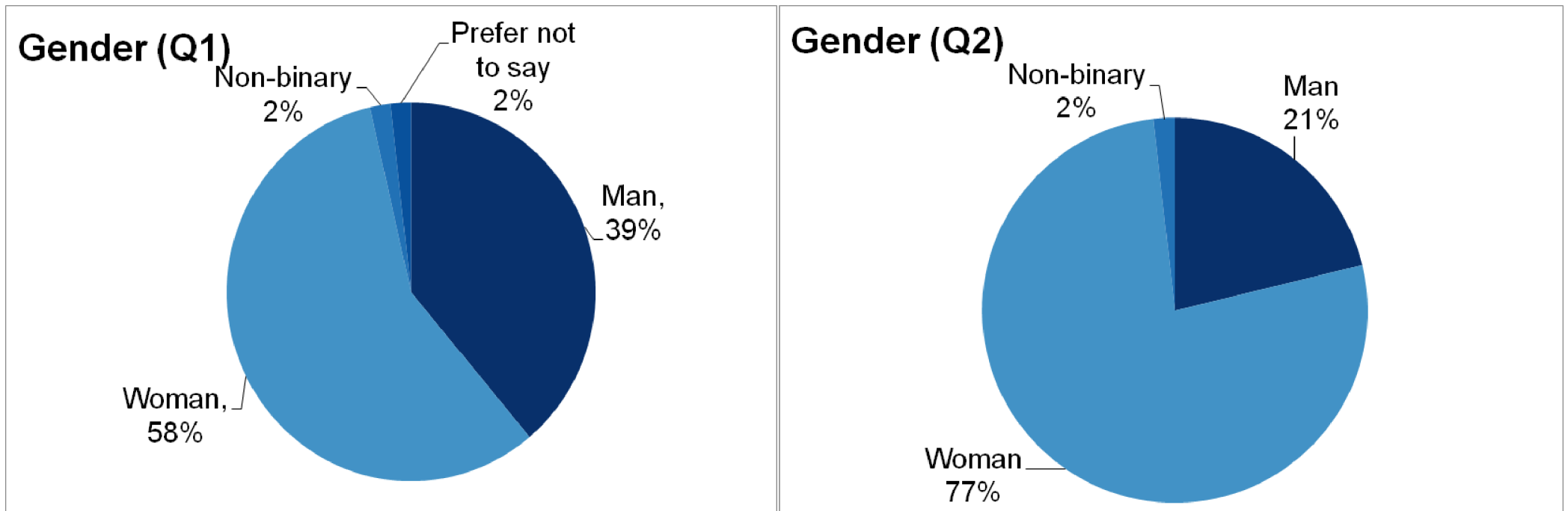


Figure 7. Gender distribution in Q1 and Q2 (Exp.2)

Exp.2: Participants (2)

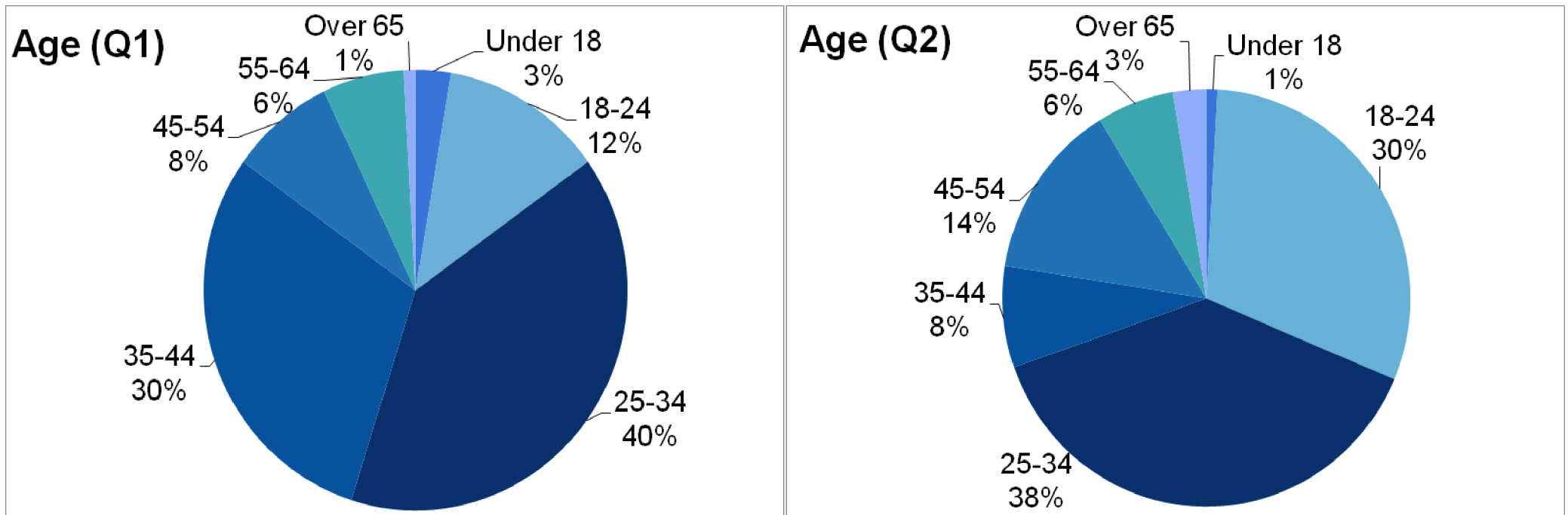


Figure 8. Age distribution in Q1 and Q2 (Exp.2)

Exp.2: Participants (3)

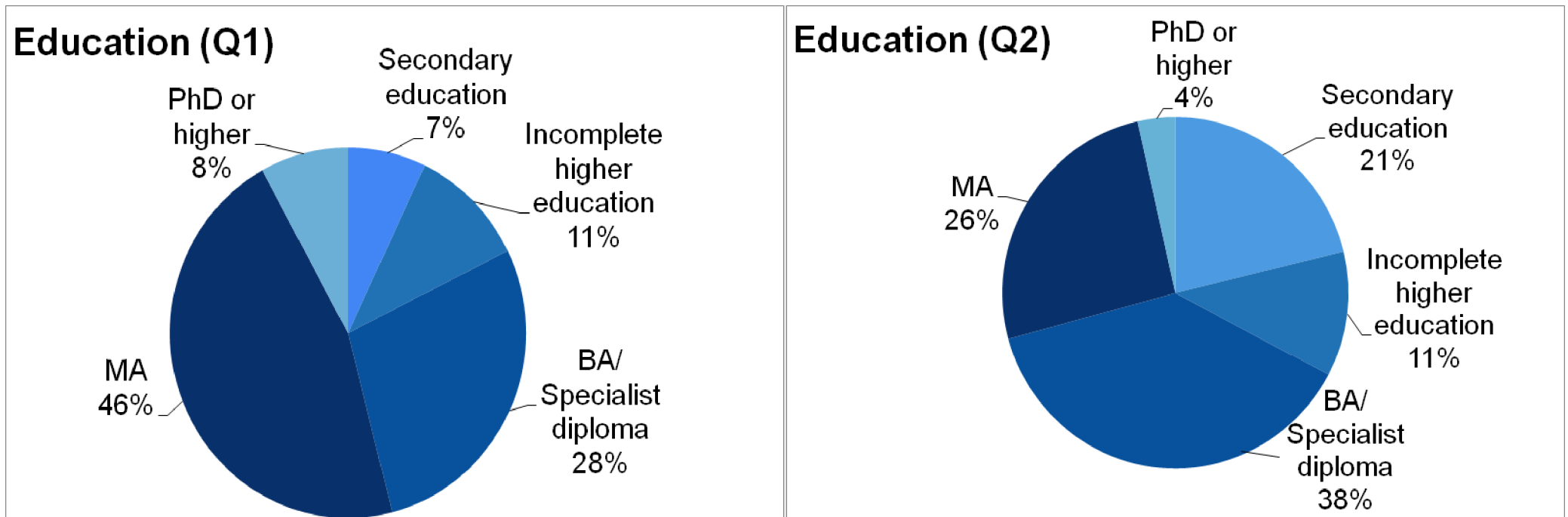


Figure 9. Participants' educational background in Q1 and Q2 (Exp.2)

Exp.2: Participants (4)

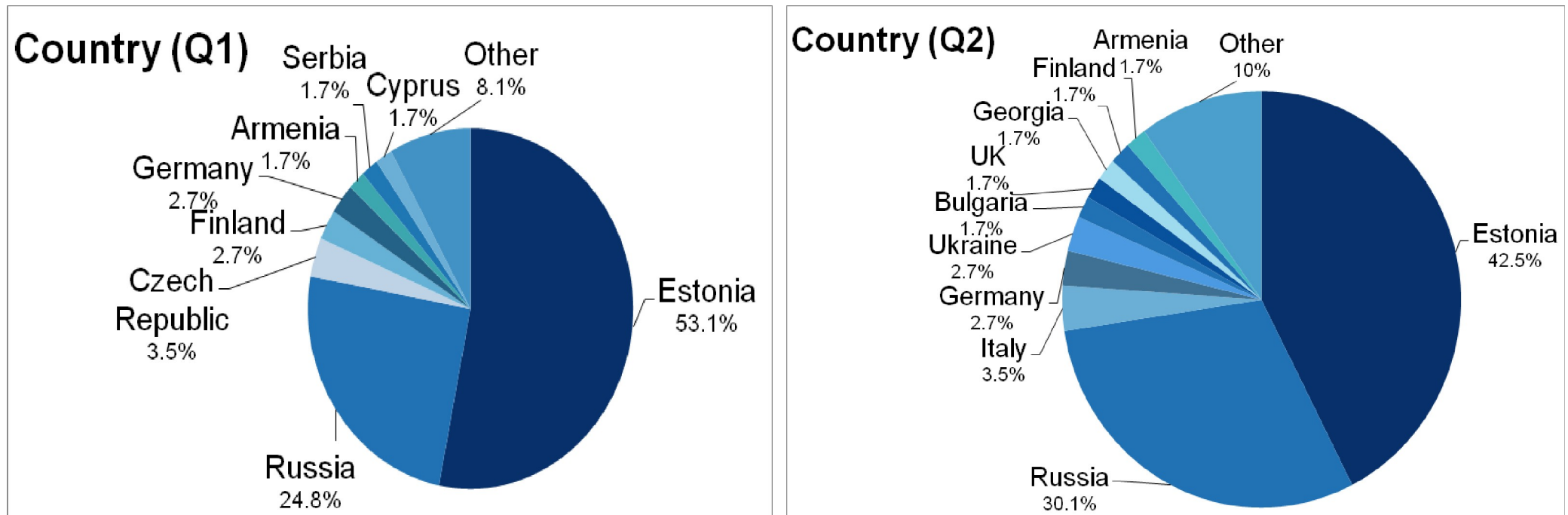


Figure 10. Distribution of participants by country in Q1 and Q2 (Exp.2)

Exp.2: Participants (5)

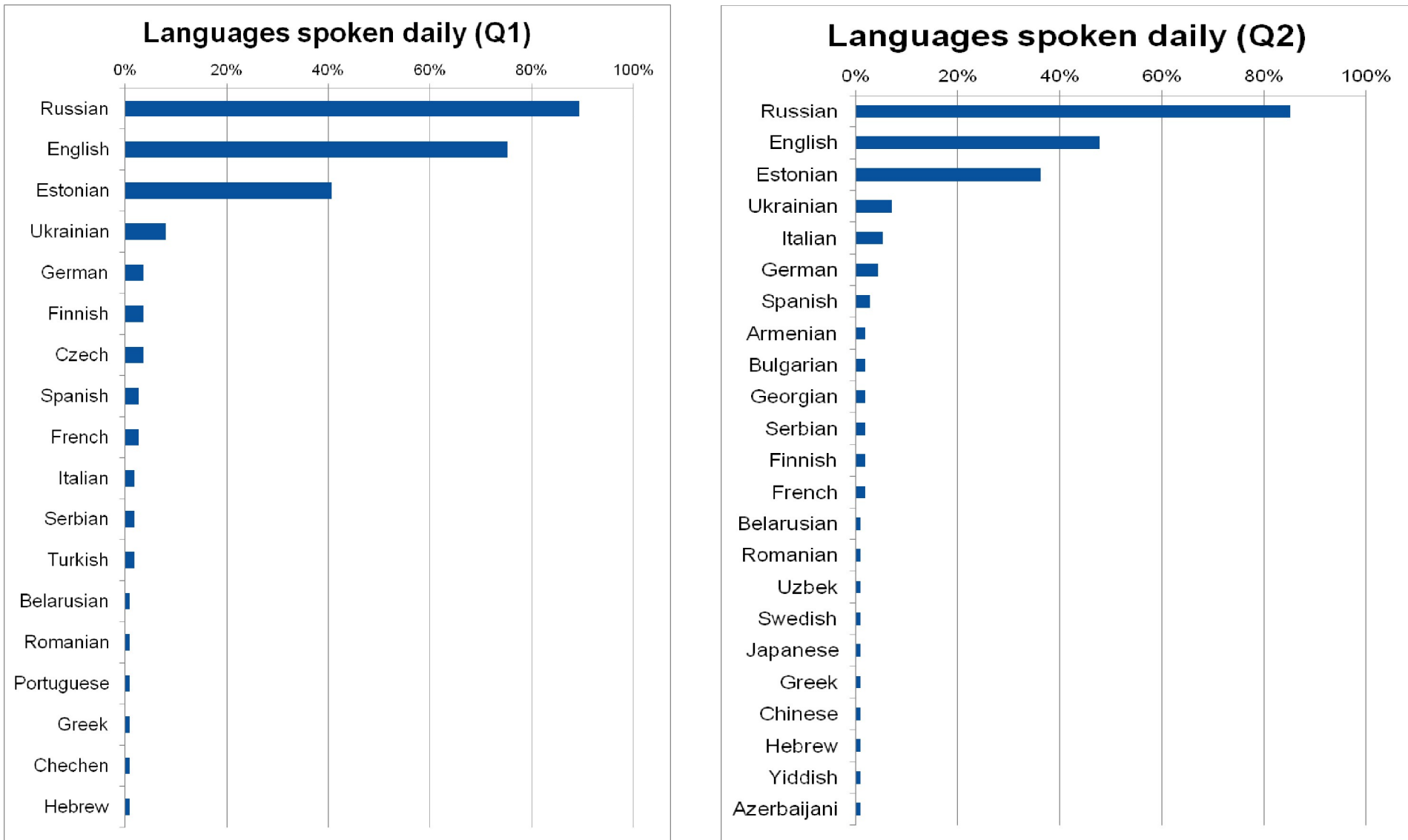


Figure 11. Languages used on a daily basis by participants (Exp.2)

Exp.2: Results

Comparison of mean evaluations of female and male voices

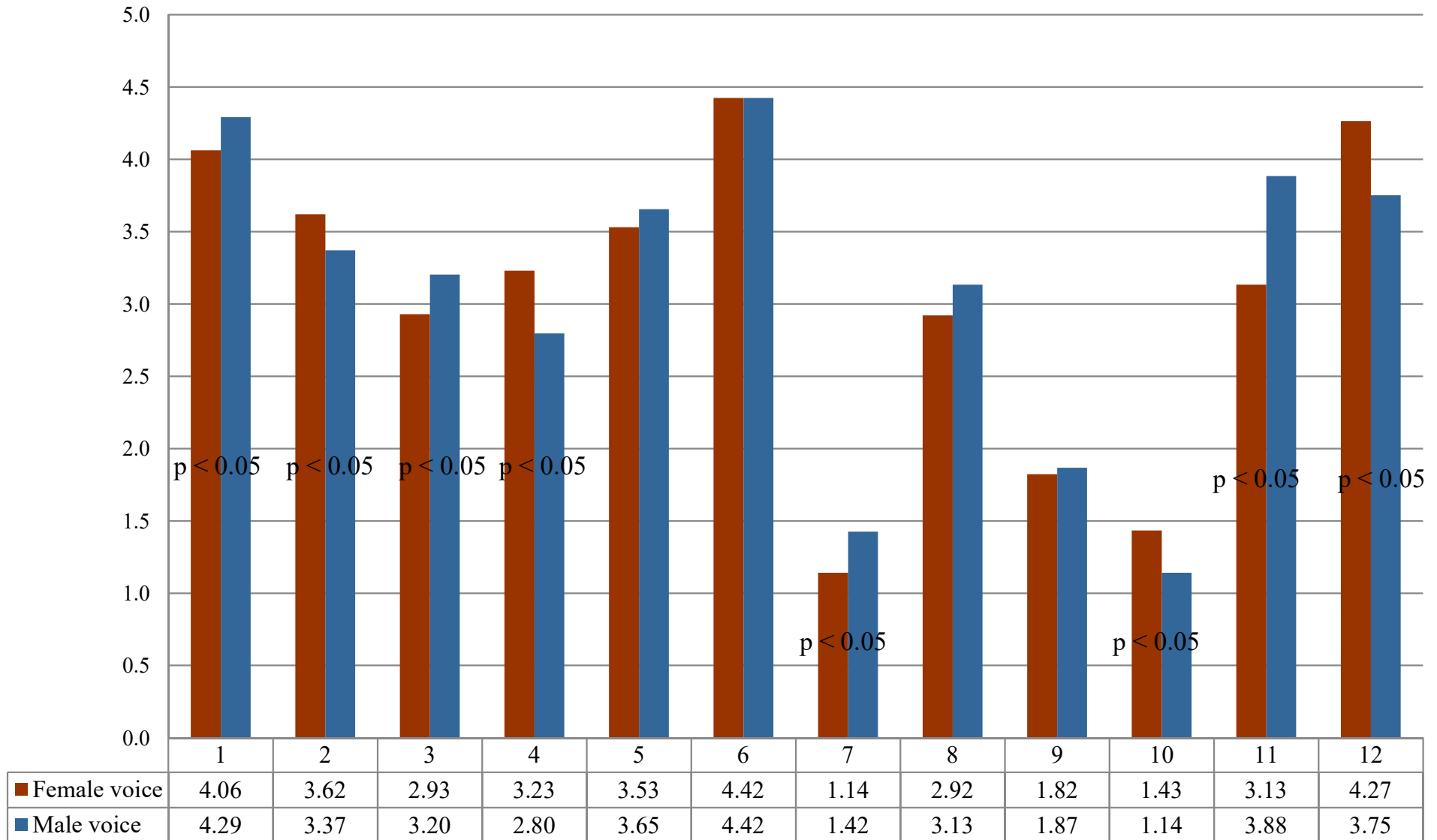


Figure 12. Mean evaluations of politeness

Female voice > Male voice

Requests	English translation	Linguistic formulation	Extralinguistic aspects	Voice in Q1	Voice in Q2
2. Серёг, у тебя сигареты не будет?	'Sereg, do you have a cigarette?'	Truncated colloquial vocative; negative interrogative (indirect format)	Smoking as a socially marked activity	Female voice* 18-24 Russia (has been living in Estonia for several years)	Male voice** 25-34 Russia (has been living in Czech Republic for several years)
4. (На работе) Иг... шк... шкурный вопрос насчёт семнадцатого числа. Ты меня часов в восемь не поменяешь?	(At work) 'Ig...se...selfish question about the seventeenth. Could you cover for me at around eight?'	Pre-request move, hesitation, use of colloquial language; negative interrogative (indirect format)		Female voice 25-34 Ukraine (has been living in Estonia for several years)	Male voice 25-34 Ukraine
10. Так, а какого ты хрена сидишь телевизор смотришь! Быстро садись за уроки!	Well, and why the hell are you sitting [there] watching TV? Get to your homework right now!	Exclamatory sentence with coarse language; unmitigated imperative (direct format)	Domestic interaction, childcare, homework, reproach	Male voice 45-54 Russia	Female voice 25-34 Russia (has been living in Estonia for several years).
12. (На работе) Э-э значит у меня к вам просьба. Сделайте, пожалуйста, сверку полностью... то, что у нас есть, то, что сделано и... Потому что вот, ну, и сверху, пожалуйста, вот поставьте даты.	(At work) Ehm so I have a request for you. Please, do a full check... what we have, what has been done, and... Because, well, and please put the dates at the top	Pre-request move, explicitly announced request, repeated politeness marker 'please'; mitigated imperative (direct format)	Workplace interaction, hierarchy, institutional task management	Male voice** 25-34 Russia (has been living in Czech Republic for several years)	Female voice* 18-24 Russia (has been living in Estonia for several years)

Male voice > Female voice

Requests	English translation	Linguistic formulation	Other relevant aspects	Voice in Q1	Voice in Q2
1. Позвони мне, пожалуйста, если можно. У меня что-то телефон не очень хорошо... Ну, если есть время, позвони мне, у меня что-то со звонком. Я не могу понять	'Call me, please, if possible. My phone is not working very well... Well, if you have time, call me, there is something wrong with the ringtone. I can't understand.'	Politeness marker 'please', conditionals, reason, hesitations, repetitions; highly mitigated imperative (direct format)	Difficulty with a technical matter	Female voice 25–34 Russia (has been living in Estonia for several years)	Male voice* 35–44 Russia (has been living in Estonia for several years)
3. (Дома) Ну что же это телевизор у тебя так орёт! Сделай потише, пожалуйста!	(At home) 'Why is your television yelling so loudly! Turn it down, please!'	Exclamatory sentence; mitigated imperative (direct format)	Domestic interaction, reproach	Male voice 45–54 Russia (has been living in Estonia for several years)	Female voice 45–54 Russia (has been living in Estonia for several years)
7. Сфоткай меня бл*дь! (...) Ты вообще сверху сфоткай!	Take a picture of me f**k! (...) You just take the picture from above!	Obscene language; unmitigated imperative (direct format)	Having one's photograph taken (with attention to camera angle) as a socially marked activity	Male voice* 35–44 Russia (has been living in Estonia for several years).	Female voice 25–34 Russia
11. Дай-ка мне телефон, пожалуйста, мой. Он звонит там где-то. Пока не сбросили, Вова, поторопи*. Пожалуйста!	Give me my phone, please. It's ringing over there somewhere. Before they hang up, Vova, hurry. Please!	Colloquial particle –ka, repeated politeness marker 'please'; mitigated imperative (direct format)	Pressure and urgency	Female voice 45–54 Ukraine	Male voice 45–54 Ukraine

Conclusion



The comparison of the two experiments shows that gender-related differences in evaluations are more pronounced when participants infer speaker gender than when they hear an actual male or female voice.

In Exp.1, participants rated 17 out of 19 requests **as more polite when they attributed them to a female speaker.**

In Exp.2, **no clear pattern emerged.** Of the 12 utterances, 4 showed no statistically significant difference, 4 were evaluated as more polite in the male-voiced version and 4 in the female-voiced version. Evaluations were less dependent on social expectations and stereotypes and more sensitive to the specific realisation of each request.



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Thank you for your attention!

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