FICTIONAL TALK

Gender, Power and Kay Scarpetta

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1. Introduction and Rationale

“Women readers reading women writers writing women characters righting wrongs” (Klein 3).

“If one goes back in history no further than the founding days of the [detective] genre ... women were second-class citizens. Legally they had almost no rights; economically; they had little power; personally, they were circumscribed and limited” (Klein 4).

A lot of things have changed now, but, still today, women often have less power than men, even when it comes to language use. Many studies have been made on the differences between female and male language. Tentativeness, such as hedges and tag questions, and frequent use of minimal responses are traits that are supposedly female, while men are said to talk and interrupt more than women (Mesthrie et al. 2000:230). Some say that these differences have to do with power and dominance; a person in power speaks a certain way and that person is usually male (231). So ultimately, this should mean that a woman in a high position speaks more like a man than a woman, should it not?

Where better to look at women in stereotypically male dominated positions than in detective fiction? “Popular genres are gold mines for cultural studies because they tap into our fantasies and assumptions about gender [and] power” (Mizejewski 2004:15). An author has all the possibilities in the world, she can let her characters speak and behave in any way she wants, but she must make them believable. To do so she must be a good observer of people and her characters could quite possibly be based on real people. Chances are her observations reflect society rather accurately. Since there are differences of opinion among researchers whether certain traits have to do with gender or with power, a study of how authors perceive the way people talk could prove to be important.
2. Research Questions

One subgenre of contemporary detective fiction written by a female author is about women in high positions. An example is Kay Scarpetta, Patricia Cornwell’s protagonist and narrator, who is well-educated, well-paid and has a job which gives her status. So is Scarpetta’s speech and behaviour typically female or has she, a woman in power, developed male characteristics? If so, how does this compare to the speech of Lieutenant Pete Marino, the tough-guy detective she regularly works with? I will concentrate on Scarpetta’s speech style, but I will also compare it to Pete Marino’s style to find out if there are any major similarities or differences between them. Finally, I am also going to look for code-switching to see if Scarpetta changes the way she talks depending on who she talks to and what the situation is. In this section I will also look at Scarpetta’s speech style as a narrator.

3. Literature review

In *Hardboiled and High Heeled*, Linda Mizejewski writes that, in 1841, Edgar Allen Poe wrote what has been “acknowledged as the first mystery story” (2004:16) and that female detectives could be found in literature almost as early as this. But, she says, “the professional female character” is new; earlier, professional characters were always male (2). The only purpose to add a female character to a story was “to flesh out male desire and shadow male sexual fear” (Messent 1997:1). This has to do with “the history of professional law enforcement, which, until the early 1970s, was in fact mostly male” (Mizejewski 18).

Patricia Cornwell’s character, Kay Scarpetta, who is both a doctor and a lawyer, is a good example of this new female character (23). According to Mizejewski, “the woman detective has an ambivalent relationship to class since police work normally is tied to the working-class. Police wages are low and you do not need any higher education to do the job (4), but
“knowledge is power” (Vanacker 1997:79) and “Scarpetta’s knowledge and skill with the high-tech tools of her trade give her authority” (Messent 13) and Scarpetta’s job provides her with enough funds to drive a “customized Mercedes and live[ ] in a gated community in Richmond, Virginia” (Mizejewski 23). But Vanacker also says that female and male detectives have different kinds of knowledge. The woman detective has a “subjective, involved, empathetic type of knowing” while men have an “objective [and] distanced” knowledge (79).

“The conventional gender assumptions” of detective fiction are, according to Sabine Vanacker, “individualism, ‘masculine’ action and aggression” (63). Walton and Jones mention that female crime writers “engage[ ] with both patriarchal language and the masculine hard-boiled tradition, appropriating and shifting their formal strategies” (1999:148). Vanacker says that applying these “conventional characteristics ... to a female protagonist”, like Patricia Cornwell does, can create “certain ambivalent effects” (63). Mizejewski’s quote from Scarpetta herself in The Body Farm, can underscore this: “I was a woman who was not a woman. I was the body and sensibilities of a woman with the power and drive of a man” (44).

According to Mesthrie et al. “empirical studies of gender and talk” have found that men and women use different speech styles. Men are said to talk and interrupt more than women, while women are said to use more minimal responses, hedges and tag questions, the last two making them sound tentative (2000:230). Jennifer Coates also mentions that the way women speak is often characterized as being tentative and that the use of hedges is one of the features that is said to be linked to this tentativeness. “Hedges are linguistic forms such as I think, I’m sure, you know ... which express the speaker’s certainty or uncertainty about the proposition, under discussion” (2004:88). Lakoff, in her early research, talks about the use of hedges as giving “the impression that the speaker lacks authority or doesn’t know what he’s talking
about” (1975:54). More recent studies show that women do use hedges more than men in some situations, but it seems as if they have more than one function and do not have to be a sign of weakness (Coates 88).

Swann discusses in her article some other differences in the ways women and men talk. She tells us that most of the studies made on this subject suggest that, in a mixed-sex conversation, men tend to dominate. For example, men interrupt more than women and topics introduced by men are more likely to survive, while a woman’s role is to be ‘supportive’. Swann admits that there are contexts in which women interrupt as much as men, but on the whole it is men who are more dominant (1988:123). Many scholars, for example Zimmerman and West 1977, 1983 and West 1984, think that these gender differences also have to do with differences in power; women are often subordinate to men (in Swann 124). Swann goes on to note that others, for example O’Barr and Atkins 1980, think the differences are due to “power rather than gender” (124). Mesthrie et al. also mention Zimmerman and West’s study that states that men have an “oppressive speaking behaviour” and they relate this to “the greater degree of power more generally available to men” (231).

Coates notes that “interruptions are perhaps the most unambiguous linguistic strategy which can achieve dominance”, since when you interrupt someone you take away that person’s “right to speak” (111). A common finding is the tendency that men interrupt women more often than women interrupt men, even if the women have high status (115). Eckert and McConnell-Ginet talk about this as a “common belief” (2003:111), but go on to say that there is no “clear evidence” of it (84).

According to Coates, research has found that women “use proportionately more standard forms” than do men (68). “Standard and vernacular [varieties of a language] are ... associated with different kinds of knowledge and authority” (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 281). The standard variety is associated with education, elites and refinement (281-2), while vernacular
is associated with toughness and defiance (295) and, according to Trudgill, “men in general value working-class masculinity for its toughness (in Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 298). Since “grammar attracts overt attention in ... school”, the use of non-standard grammar is also “considered uneducated [and] rebellious” (294). Of those who move in academic and governmental circles, it is the men who are more likely to behave in a casual way. “This is no doubt because women are more easily disqualified in the professional marketplace and cannot afford to muddy the waters by talkin’ about huntin’ and fishin’ or, heaven forbid, quiltin’ ... they need to show that they know the rules” (303). “Depending on where we are, what we’re doing, who is in the audience, what we’re talking about, what we’re feeling about the situation – and any other of a number of things – we call upon resources to adapt our variety to our immediate needs” (283).

On the subject of swearing and taboo language, Coates states that “the stereotypes of the tough-talking male and the pure, never-swearing female are false” (98), but it does seem as if taboo language nowadays is “associated with power and masculinity in Western culture (De Klerk in Coates, 98). Eckert and McConnell-Ginet note that “swearing is widely considered an expression of very strong emotion [such as] anger ... or simply deep frustration” (181). They also mention that, among emotions, anger is the “most expected and tolerated ... from men” and that anger can increase a person’s power. This power of anger and swearing probably comes from the fact that it can intimidate, even if this does not happen every time or with everyone. “Women’s anger is often repositioned as frustration or emotional ‘upset’, framed as nonthreatening” (182). Eckert and McConnell-Ginet claim that vulgar language is “considered unsuitable for women” but that, nowadays, women swear more and more (181). This “increased use of obscene language [by women] in expressing anger can represent a repositioning that challenges male dominance and that claims authority” (182).
When it comes to the use of directives, quite a few researchers have studied this from a gender point of view. One of them is Goodwin, who studied a group of children in Philadelphia. Her findings showed that the boys and the girls used different types of directives (Coates 94); the boy group used more commands and the girl group used more “framed directives as suggestions or proposals for joint action” (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 141). West studied female and male doctors to see if there were any gender differences in their use of directives, and she also found that the men used more “imperative forms” while the women use more “mitigated forms” (Coates 204). Coates calls the forms that men use more aggravated – explicit – commands and the forms women use mitigated since they tend to soften the directives with words like let’s and maybe (Coates 95). Eckert and McConnell-Ginet point out that these mitigated forms are “often considered more polite” (188).

The theories presented in this section will form the base of my analysis. I will apply these theories to the speech of Kay Scarpetta and Pete Marino to see if they coincide; if the two characters follow the patterns shown in the many studies I have quoted.

4. Methods

Patricia Cornwell has, so far, written fourteen books about Chief Medical Examiner Kay Scarpetta and Lieutenant Pete Marino. I will use the fourth novel in this series, Cruel & Unusual, to investigate samples of Scarpetta’s and Marino’s speech styles. My study will be based on qualitative discourse analysis and I will look at tentative and direct speech, grammar, taboo language and code-switching. These language features will then be used in the comparison of Scarpetta’s and Marino’s ways of talking. Besides looking at the characters’ speech styles, I will also analyse Scarpetta’s use of code-switching, both as character and narrator. But I am going to begin my paper by giving a general description of
the gender situation in detective fiction and a background check on Kay Scarpetta and Pete Marino.

5. Delimitations and Limitations

Even if Cornwell has written many books about Kay Scarpetta, I have chosen to analyse only one in the series. *Cruel & Unusual* was written in 1993 so it is possible that Cornwell has developed Scarpetta a little in the later novels and altered her way of speaking, but I am quite certain that it is basically the same throughout the series.

My analysis is of a female protagonist in a detective novel written by a female author and is quite limited to this area. Even if, as I have mentioned earlier, my findings could reflect society, it is safe to say that not all women in power speak this way. Not even all female protagonists in detective fiction speak the same way, but there might be a pattern.

6. Definitions

- **Code-switching:** The use of “different forms in different contexts”, especially switching between forms within the same speech situation (Coates 154).
- **Directives:** “a speech act which tries to get someone to do something” (Coates 94).
- **Hedges:** “linguistic forms such as I think, I’m sure, you know, sort of and perhaps which express the speaker’s certainty or uncertainty about the proposition under discussion” (Coates 88).
- **Interruptions:** “violations of the turntaking rules of conversation” (Coates 113).
- **Register:** “variation in language according to the context in which it is being used” (Mesthrie 72).
7. Findings

In this section I am going to analyze samples from the novel according to my secondary sources. Since I cannot present every example of a certain language use I will choose those which best represent the feature in question. But I will start off by providing a background check on the female detective genre and some of the characters in *Cruel & Unusual*.

7.1. Background

Detective fiction has been around since Edgar Allen Poe in 1841 wrote what has been “acknowledged as the first mystery story” (Mizejewski 16) and female detectives have existed for almost as long. But, Mizejewski claims, the professional female is a new phenomenon in detective fiction; earlier, professional characters were always male and women only figured “to flesh out male desire and shadow male sexual fear” (Messent 1), or, as in the case of Agatha Christy’s Miss Marple, were not professional detectives. “These gender stereotypes” have, according to Mizejewski, to do with “the history of professional law enforcement, which, until the early 1970s, was in fact mostly male” (18).

The female author of detective fiction often uses “both patriarchal language and the masculine hard-boiled tradition” (Walton & Jones 148) and applies the traditional male characteristics “to a female protagonist” (Vanacker 63). Vanacker mentions that knowledge equals power, but that the female detective has a different kind of knowledge than the male detective. The woman detective has a “subjective, involved, empathic type of knowing” while men’s knowledge is “objective [and] distanced” (79).
The protagonist of *Cruel & Unusual* is Kay Scarpetta, the Chief Medical Examiner of Virginia. Mizejewski claims that “the woman detective character has an ambivalent relationship to class” because police work is normally tied to the working-class – wages are low and you do not need any higher education (4). But Scarpetta went to school for seventeen years after having finished high school, receiving scholarships for the whole time, and is now a lawyer as well as a doctor and has got “enough degrees and certificates to paper a wall” (*Cruel & Unusual* 38). She had a poor childhood but has worked herself up the social and professional ladder and now “drives a customized Mercedes and lives in a gated community in Richmond, Virginia” (Mizejewski 23).

Her ancestors were from Italy, but Scarpetta was born and raised in Miami where her mother, sister and niece, Lucy, still live. Her father was the owner of a small grocery store there, but he died when Scarpetta was young. She has a very good relationship with Lucy, but not with her sister Dorothy or her mother. Dorothy is a successful writer of children’s books, but, in Scarpetta’s words, “simply a failure as a human being” (*C&R* 77).

Lieutenant Pete Marino is a detective at the Richmond police and a friend of Scarpetta’s. Besides a poor, loveless upbringing in “the wrong part of New Jersey” (20), Marino’s wife of thirty years recently left him and he has a son no one knows anything about. This has left him rather bitter and he is “always angry about something” (20). Marino has also got very high blood pressure and thus has got to stop smoking and lose weight, something that does not improve his mood.

**Summary of the Novel**

It is Christmas time in Richmond, Virginia. Ronnie Joe Waddell is being executed after having killed a young TV reporter, and Chief Medical Examiner Kay Scarpetta is preparing her morgue. The same night a young boy is shot and he later dies. The murder scene is a
mirror image of the one Waddell left behind nine years ago. When, a few days later, Waddell’s fingerprints are found in another murder victim’s house, Scarpetta and Marino start to believe that the murders are somehow connected. This suspicion grows stronger when Lucy, Scarpetta’s niece who staying with her for Christmas and who is an expert on computers, finds out that Waddell’s fingerprint file has been altered in AFIS (Automated Fingerprint Identification Systems). This suspicion is not shared by everyone, though. When Susan, Scarpetta’s morgue assistant, is found dead in her car on Christmas day, some people think Scarpetta did it. The police find her fingerprints on an envelope in Susan’s house and Scarpetta is believed to have paid her assistant off and later murdered her. Because of this, and because the Commonwealth Attorney does not like Scarpetta, she is summoned to appear before the special grand jury. The jury finds her innocent and lets her go and she can continue her pursuit of the real killer. At the end of the novel they know the killer’s identity, but he is still out there roaming the streets.

Characters in *Cruel & Unusual*

Kay Scarpetta: Main character and Chief Medical Examiner of the state of Virginia.

Pete Marino: Detective Lieutenant. A friend of Scarpetta’s who she often works with.

Lucy: Scarpetta’s very intelligent seventeen-year-old niece and computer whiz kid.

Benton Wesley: FBI agent and the Chief of the Behavioural Unit at Quantico (FBI headquarters).

Susan Story: Scarpetta’s morgue assistant.

Nicholas Grueman: A professor Scarpetta had in law school and who she has to deal with in her current job. Later becomes her attorney.
Roy Patterson: The Commonwealth Attorney who questions Scarpetta in court. He does not like Scarpetta since she has made a fool out of him several times when she, as expert witness, has thrown his arguments.

Mark James: FBI agent and Scarpetta’s lover who recently died as a bomb went off at a London Underground station.

7.2. Scarpetta versus Marino

Scarpetta and Marino are two very different characters and their ways of talking are like the two ends of a scale. Yet they are often on the same page as they are investigating a crime and Scarpetta, as the narrator, often reflects Marino’s earlier comments. In this section I am going to look at certain aspects of their language use to find the similarities and differences between them. After having discussed Scarpetta and Marino I will take a look at some of the other characters for contrasting purposes.

7.2.a. Tentative/Direct Speech

The way women speak is often considered tentative (Coates 88) and according to some “empirical studies of gender and talk” this means that women use more hedges, minimal responses and tag questions than men, while men talk and interrupt more (Mesthrie et al. 230).

Hedges

In her early research, Lakoff mentions that the use of hedges can give “the impression that the speaker lacks authority or doesn’t know what he’s talking about” (54). More recent studies show that, in some situations, women do use more hedges than men, but they do not have to
be a sign of weakness. Instead, Coates says, they show certainty or uncertainty about something (88), or can serve as a face-saving device.

It seems as if neither Scarpetta nor Marino use hedges much, but there are a few examples. When Scarpetta is asked if she can make out a set of prints she answers “maybe barely” (324), maybe being the hedge, and Marino uses the hedge *I think* in the statements “I think your son’s home” (197) and “I think you need to see where his body was found” (58). Neither of these correlates to Lakoff’s statement about lack of authority. There is only one instance that I have found where Scarpetta displays a lack of authority, and that is when she is talking to her niece Lucy about a computer problem; “I think someone might have broken security” (71). In this statement Scarpetta uses both the hedge *I think* as well as *might* which shows her uncertainty about the issue, but also the fact that when it comes to computers, Lucy’s knowledge is far greater.

There is one other character in this novel that uses far more hedges than Scarpetta and Marino do. In the following example, Susan, Scarpetta’s morgue assistant, is proposing that her boss should refrain from listing her as a witness of an autopsy: ‘*I don’t think* you should ... *I mean*, I helped ... *I just think* it’s better ... *I really* wasn’t present’ (45 emphasis mine). Another example, a little earlier in the story, she uses hedges as she is speaking to Scarpetta: ‘*You know*, I don’t trust ... *I don’t think* they care’ (9 emphasis mine). In both these examples Susan is upset, and later we get to know that she is hiding things from Scarpetta. Moreover, she is female and in a lower status position than Scarpetta. Another character that is using hedges while talking to Scarpetta is Detective Joe Trent; “*I mean*, he’s not dead ... One on his inner right thigh, *you know*” (4-5 emphasis mine). Marino later describes him as a “nervous Nellie” (21), applying a female term to Trent; suggesting he speaks the same way to him.

There seem to be no apparent gender differences among the characters in their use of hedges, but rather a difference in power. Scarpetta and Marino have both got fairly high status
in their respective occupations and those with less power occasionally respond to that by showing uncertainty.

**Interruptions**

“Interruptions are perhaps the most unambiguous linguistic strategy which can achieve dominance, since to interrupt someone is to deprive them – or at least to attempt to deprive them – of the right to speak” (Coates 111). There have been several studies made on interruptions that show the same result – men tend to interrupt women more than women tend to interrupt men, even if the women have high status (Coates 115). Eckert and McConnell-Ginet agree that this is the “common belief” (111), but claim that there is no “clear evidence” that this is the case (84).

Scarpetta is the character that interrupts the most in *Cruel & Unusual* but she is also interrupted herself by other people. She interrupts the police officer guarding the morgue and her mother on different occasions, but in both instances they are rambling and she wants them to stop talking. Tom Lucero, another police officer, also gets interrupted by Scarpetta. She has asked him a question and when he has answered he goes on to talk about his impression of the matter, but Scarpetta has got her answer and interrupts him with “We’ve got a problem” (96). Parents usually have more power than their children, but Scarpetta’s high position and wealth leave her mother more vulnerable and make it easy for Scarpetta to interrupt her. But there could also be another interpretation; Scarpetta’s rather defective relationship with her mother could mean that the interruption has nothing to with power. With the two police officers, on the other hand, Scarpetta is probably able to interrupt them because of her higher status.
Scarpetta tries to interrupt Benton Wesley, but he “would not let [her]” (228). Scarpetta and Wesley have worked together several times before and he was also Mark’s best friend. Because they know each other so well, I do not think this unsuccessful interruption has much to do with power. Scarpetta’s interruption of Grueman, on the other hand, could very well be a display of power from her side, at least at first glance. She did not like him in law school and, according to Marino, he “jerks [her] around” (46). But at the time of Scarpetta’s interruption, Grueman has explained why he has acted the way he has and told her he wants to help her, so it does not seem to be an act of dominance due to the fact that she does not like him. But perhaps Grueman’s sudden kindness enables Scarpetta to interrupt him – he is no longer the person who “jerks” her around, he no longer has that power over her.

There is one person with whom Scarpetta battles over power. Roy Patterson does not like Scarpetta at all, and Marino tells her why: ‘I ever tell you how much Patterson hates your guts? ... You embarrassed him when he was a defence attorney. You ... made him look like an idiot’ (285), and the feeling is mutual. When Scarpetta now stands in front of the jury it is Patterson who runs the show. He interrupts her twice but when he is getting personal she gets angry and interrupts him back:

“[KS]’... the check was delivered to Charles Hale. Benton Wesley-‘

He cut me off. [RP]’The story just gets more preposterous.’

[KS]’Mr. Patterson...’

[RP]’Who is Charles Hale?’”

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“[RP]’Aside from the obvious conflict of interest involved in the chief medical examiner’s sleeping with an FBI agent, the subject is nongermane. So I won’t ask-‘

I interrupted him. [KS]’My relationship with Mark...’” (390-1).
An interesting point is that Patterson’s interruptions do not work. Scarpetta does not give in and one member of the jury finally says that he wants to hear what she has to say, which means Patterson has to give in. Scarpetta’s interruption, on the other hand, does work and she is handed the floor.

Patterson aside, only two characters interrupt Scarpetta throughout the novel and one of them is Governor Norring. He is the person who has the most power over Scarpetta, since, if he wishes, he can have her fired and thus take away her status. The Governor interrupts her, but she does not give in entirely. She refuses to do what he wants her to do and basically threatens him to do something that would make him lose face.

The other person who interrupts Scarpetta is Marino: “[KS]‘He called me about a boy-’ He cut me off. [PM]‘Eddie Heath?’” (21). In this case it is not about grabbing the floor; my interpretation is instead that Marino is informing Scarpetta about his knowledge of the case in discussion¹. I have only found one other sample of Marino interrupting another person and that occurs when he and Scarpetta are questioning a murder victim’s neighbour. He actually interrupts her twice and is displaying the power vested in him as a police officer, but, as Scarpetta points out, that was just “a role he played” (111).

When discussing the interruptions made in this novel, I have stated several times that they probably have nothing to do with power. But the fact that Scarpetta interrupts more than she gets interrupted might tell us something different. If Coates, and many other researchers, are right and women do not interrupt as much as men, then maybe it does have to do with power after all.

Directives

¹ My supervisor’s interpretation is different from mine, which could be a reflection of our different cultural backgrounds.
“Directives are requests, commands, and other speech acts that ask the addressee to act in some way specified by the speaker” (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 188). Goodwin’s study of groups of children in Philadelphia showed that the boys and the girls used different types of directives (Coates 94). In the group of boys only a hierarchy was formed and those more dominant commanded the others. The girls were less likely to command than the boys; instead they used “framed directives as suggestions or proposals for joint action” (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 141). West’s study of male and female doctors also shows a gender difference in the use of directives. “Male doctors preferred to use imperative forms” while “female doctors preferred to use more mitigated forms” (Coates 204), mitigated forms being words like let’s and maybe (95). Eckert and McConnell-Ginet also point out that “it is often considered more polite” to use more mitigated directives (188).

Going by the studies just described, Scarpetta should be using more mitigated directives than explicit commands, but looking at how she talks to Marino, one can see that this is not always the case. For instance, in the following example Scarpetta has just told Marino that she wants her Christmas present to be Marino and Lucy getting along; Marino: ‘Who said I was giving you a Christmas present?’ Scarpetta: ‘Of course you are. You’re going to give me what I’ve just requested’ (151). Another example occurs a little earlier in the novel when Scarpetta needs Marino to help her out; [KS]: ‘I need to look over a few things at the pen right away.’ [PM]: ‘The problem with looking over the pen is it looks back.’ [KS]: ‘That’s why you’re going with me’ (46). Here Scarpetta lets Marino know that he has no other options but to go with her. Marino speaks basically the same way to Scarpetta, [PM]‘If you ain’t thinking about stopping these rumours, then you’d better start thinking about it’ (238 emphasis mine).

Scarpetta does not speak this way to everyone, though. When she is telling her secretary what she should ask her computer analyst to do she is using several mitigated forms that soften the directive: ‘I need her to do a search for me. Codes to look for would be ... Maybe a
free-format search ... You might try ...’ (35 emphasis mine). And not everyone speaks to Scarpetta the same way Marino does, either; [BW]: ‘Let’s take a look’ (227 emphasis mine), ‘Maybe you should talk with him’(228). The last directive is put like a suggestion and Scarpetta does not have to follow it, but she does.

Goodwin’s and West’s research showed that male speakers, or, as in Goodwin’s case, dominant male speakers, use more explicit commands and female speakers more mitigated directives. But it is also, as mentioned earlier, more polite to use soft directives and this could explain Benton’s choice of words. Scarpetta does not follow the pattern shown in Goodwin’s and West’s studies. The women West looked at were doctors, and hence women with fairly high status, but they still used mitigated directives. So the way Scarpetta commands Marino has probably nothing to do with power or dominance, or politeness for that matter, and the fact that they are such good friends strengthens this statement. My suggestion is that Scarpetta can talk this way to Marino because she knows he will not be offended; he does the same to her.

7.2.b. Standard/Non-standard Speech

“Standard and vernacular [varieties of a language] are ... associated with different kinds of knowledge and authority” (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 281). The standard variety is associated with education and elites - and therefore also with refinement (281-2) - and research has found that women “use proportionately more standard forms” than men (Coates 68). Since “grammar attracts overt attention in ... school”, the use of nonstandard grammar is “considered uneducated [but also] rebellious”. This gives non-standard varieties an association with “toughness and defiance” (294-5), but toughness is also associated with the working-class masculinity that, according to Trudgill, is valued by men (in Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 298). Men are more likely than women to behave casually in the academic
and governmental circles. “This is no doubt because women are more easily disqualified in the professional marketplace and cannot afford to muddy the waters by talkin’ about huntin’ and fishin’ or, heaven forbid, quiltin’ ... they need to show that they know the rules” (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 303).

This is where Scarpetta’s way of talking differs the most from Marino’s - Scarpetta is speaking Standard English and Marino vernacular. Scarpetta is always grammatically correct, whereas Marino is not. Even if neither of them reflects on this difference between them, Lucy does. Marino does not like her because he thinks she treats him “like a dumb shit who was born in a barn” (150) and Scarpetta points out to Lucy that the last time they met she was “continually correcting his grammar” (140). We actually get to see proof of this, since she does it again; Marino: ‘You’re saying you could tell if Waddell’s records was changed in AFIS?’ Lucy: ‘Yes, I’m saying I could tell if his records were changed’ (148).

It seems as if, when it comes to grammar, Scarpetta talks the same way whoever she talks to and whatever the occasion – she is always grammatically correct according to the rules of standard usage and she does not use much slang. Marino, on the other hand, seems to change his way of talking a bit, depending on the situation. When he is delivering the bad news to a murder victim’s family, his language is more like Scarpetta’s – the grammar is correct and it is free of slang; ‘I’m afraid I have very bad news for you, Mrs. Dawson’ (190), ‘Do you know where her husband, Jason Story, is?’ ... ‘I’d rather talk to him alone for a minute. Maybe you could take me to him?’ (191). I think the biggest difference from how he normally talks is the use of ‘do’, something he usually leaves out; ‘You suggesting ...’ (126), ‘You mind?’ (144). The next day he is talking to Scarpetta and has gone back to his normal speaking pattern; ‘Maybe we’re dealing with some squirrel who wears ... Only other time I’ve ever found feathers was when this drone broke into a crib ...’ (200). Here the use of words like ‘squirrel’, ‘drone’, ‘crib’ and the fact that he has left out ‘the’ in ‘only other time’ makes his vernacular
language variety very apparent. When Scarpetta is talking to the murder victim’s father her language use is the same as when she is talking to Marino; Scarpetta to the father: ‘It would seem she did not want anyone to know where she was going or who she was going to see’ (195), Scarpetta to Marino: ‘it appears Jennifer Deighton faxed a note to Nicholas Grueman less than two days before her murder’ (171).

The other characters in the story seem to speak more or less grammatically correctly. Lucy, as we saw earlier, is correcting Marino’s grammar and even the police officers with a lower rank than Marino are speaking a relatively standard English. Many of the characters have many years of formal education behind them – Scarpetta, Wesley, Grueman – and, as I mentioned earlier in this section, the standard variety is associated with education. Lucy has yet to finish school, but she is very intelligent and an intellectual. The fact that Marino is not an intellectual can be seen when Scarpetta and Marino are looking at some books one murder victim had beside her bed; “’Paris Trout,’ he mused. ‘What’s it about, fishing in France?’ Unfortunately, he was serious” (99).

Earlier in this paper I stated that police work usually is tied to the working-class, working-class masculinity is tied to toughness, and toughness is tied to hardboiled detective fiction. Therefore it would be difficult to imagine Marino speaking in any other way than the way he does. Considering Scarpetta’s education and knowledge, and the fact that she is a woman in a high position, her use of Standard English comes as no surprise, either.

7.2.c. Swearing and Taboo Language

Coates has stated that “the stereotypes of the tough-talking male and the pure, never-swearing female are false” (68), but Eckert and McConnell-Ginet claim that vulgar language is still “considered unsuitable for women” (181) and, according to De Klerk, it seems as if, in Western culture, taboo language is “associated with power and masculinity” (in Coates 98).
Swearing is often seen as “an expression of very strong emotion [such as] anger ... or simply deep frustration” (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 181) and the “most expected and tolerated” emotion among men is just anger. Anger can increase a person’s power, which is probably due to the fact that anger and swearing can intimidate. This intimidation factor mostly belongs to male speakers, though; when women show anger they are often considered “nonthreatening”. But women’s “use of obscene language in expressing anger” has increased, something that could “represent a repositioning that challenges male dominance and that claims authority” (182).

Scarpetta does occasionally make use of profane language to express emotion, but nowhere nearly as much as Marino does. She curses when Lucy is trying to talk her through a computer problem over the phone and she gets frustrated; Lucy: ‘You should have a four-eighty-six chip in that thing, Aunt Kay. Why’s it so slow?’ Scarpetta: ‘It’s not the damn chip that’s slow!’ (72). But it is not only when she is frustrated that she swears, she also does it when she is angry; Scarpetta: ‘They’ve taken my life, goddamn it, but I’m not giving them my soul ...’ Grueman: ‘Then you will certainly be indicted.’ Scarpetta: ‘Considering the bastards I’m up against, I think that’s a certainty anyway’ (380). She is probably considered relatively nonthreatening at these occasions, but there is one instance when she is, if not threatening, at least intimidating enough for Marino to answer ‘Easy, Doc’: ‘My fingerprints!’ I said to Marino the instant he appeared at the door. ‘What the hell is this business about fingerprints belonging to me’ (282). Most of the time Scarpetta is swearing she is doing it quietly to herself, but as we have seen, she occasionally swears in front of other people, mostly Marino and Lucy.

Marino is the person who swears the most in Cruel & Unusual. This goes neatly together with his use of vernacular language and the association of swearing and masculinity. It also goes hand in hand with Scarpetta’s statement that Marino is “always angry about something”
(20). Marino is indeed angry a lot of the time and he is angry most of the time he swears: ‘Friggin’ unbelievable. We had this great latent print ... I got no idea how many hours I put on that damn case. Then we catch the bastard because ... Too damn bad ...’ (19). He is also using far more explicit words than Scarpetta: ‘I don’t fucking believe it. He went out the window like a damn jackrabbit and there’s not a sign of him. Goddamn son of a bitch’ (399), ‘Hey, fuck the CA, the city, the government, and all of them’ (366).

The other characters do not seem to swear as much as Scarpetta and Marino, but, then, we do not get to follow them as much, either. Lucy uses profane language a couple of times when she talks about her mother and her men: ‘I don’t understand how she can sleep with every dickhead who takes her out for dinner and a movie’ (370). Lucy’s grandmother: ‘What time did your mother say she was coming over?’ Lucy: ‘As soon as she and what’s-his-name finish screwing, they’ll be here’ (407).

That the stereotype of the “never-swearing female” is incorrect is easy to underscore with examples from Cruel & Unusual, but also the “tough-talking male”. Even if Marino swears a lot, he is the only male character to do so. Some of the other men do slip in the occasional swearword as the are speaking, but no one comes even close to the amount Marino and Scarpetta are using. Just as Eckert and McConnell-Ginet have claimed, swearing does go hand in hand with strong emotion, something both Scarpetta and Marino repeatedly show us.

7.3. Code-Switching

“Depending on where we are, what we’re doing, who is in our audience, what we’re talking about, how we’re feeling about the situation – and any other of a number of things – we call upon resources to adapt our [language] variety to our immediate needs” (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 283). The term code-switching is usually used about the changing between different language varieties, often standard and vernacular, but in this paper I will use it to
describe the switching from one register to another, in this case from specialized language to lay terms.

“Knowledge is power” (Vanacker 79) and Scarpetta is very knowledgeable in her field – her “knowledge and skill with the high-tech tools ... give her authority” (Messent 13). Scarpetta uses a very specialized language when she needs to be seen as a professional and this can be seen when she is talking to Grueman in the beginning of the novel, at a time when she still thought that “his true agenda ... was to impeach my professional competence and in general make me feel stupid”(36). Grueman: ‘It says here that you found abrasions on his arms, the inner aspects of both upper arms.’ Scarpetta: ‘That’s correct.’ Grueman: ‘And just what, exactly, is an inner aspect?’ Scarpetta: ‘The inside of the arm above the antecubital fossa’ (37). Most people could probably figure out what the ‘inner aspects’ of the upper arms are, but probably not the ‘antecubital fossa’. In fact, she needs to explain this to Grueman (and to the readers), an act that gives her authority,

Scarpetta herself, as the narrator, explains why she, when she is talking to Marino, is using specialized language: “I was unnerved ... When I felt a loss of control, I became very clinical’ (128). A murder has just occurred and it turns out the victim tried to phone Scarpetta several times prior to her death, but always got the machine. In this example, Scarpetta is explaining the findings of the autopsy to Marino:

“‘She’s got irregular hemorrhages in the sternocleidomastoid muscles bilaterally. She’s also got a fracture of the right cornua of the hyoid. Her death was caused by asphyxia, due to pressure applied to the neck.’

Marino interrupted, loudly. ‘You suggesting she got yoked?’
I showed him another photograph. ‘She’s also got some facial petechia, or pinpoint hemorrhages. These findings are consistent with yoking, yes’” (126).

Here Scarpetta is just talking to Marino and does not have to use this kind of language, but she does and Marino explains, in lay terms, to the reader. Sometimes she does explain it herself, perhaps to Marino as well as the reader, by switching to non-professional terms: ‘She had left ventricular hypertrophy, or thickening of the heart’ (127).

Scarpetta does not talk in this way just to get power and authority over the other characters. When Scarpetta is talking in specialized terms as a narrator, it is for the benefit of the readers, not the other characters: “I silently agreed with him. Waddell’s nosebleed was due to the Valsalva maneuver, or an abrupt increase in intrathoracic pressure” (55). She uses specialized terms to begin with and then explains to the reader by switching to non-technical language. By doing this, she gives the impression that she knows what she is talking about and she becomes convincing as a doctor. She is worthy of her high occupational position.

Yet another use of specialized terms that I have found is the metaphorical illustration of humour. In the following example Scarpetta is last-minute shopping for a Christmas tree: “At this late date, there wasn’t much of a selection ... It would have been lovely were it not scoliotic. Decorating it proved to be more an orthopedic challenge than festive ritual” (160). The words ‘scoliotic’ and ‘orthopedic’ are not any one normally would use when talking about a Christmas tree, but, considering Scarpetta’s occupation, they give an amusing twist to her narration.

Of course, Scarpetta does not always speak in the language of her profession. When she, as the narrator, describes people she often speaks in a very casual kind of way, bordering on mean: “She was an unsmiling woman built like a baptist church, her shiny Sam Browne belt the only indication she had a waist” (50), “The judge’s wife was a woman in her fifties
refined by money into a work of well-bred art. In her youth, I suspected, she had not been pretty” (168).

8. Conclusion
In this paper I have analysed the ways the main characters in Patricia Cornwell’s *Cruel & Unusual* talk. I have looked at tentative and direct speech, interruptions, directives and standard/non-standard speech and compared Scarpetta’s and Marino’s way of talking from these aspects. Further, I looked at Scarpetta’s use of code-switching. I have quoted researchers of female and male language and tried to apply their findings to my analysis and it seems as if their findings do not always correspond to mine; rather, mine correspond to theories that the language of women in power positions may be converging with what have traditionally been male way of speaking.

Many researchers have found that women often speak more tentatively than men; they use more hedges and do not interrupt as much as men. They are also said to use more mitigated directives, whereas men use more explicit commands. The characters in *Cruel & Unusual* do not follow these patterns, especially not Scarpetta. When it comes to hedges, I see no proof of Lakoff’s claim that using hedges can show a lack of authority and I do not see any gender differences, either, but, then, she conducted her study over three decades ago. Neither Scarpetta nor Marino use hedges much and the two characters that use them more are one woman and one man. But both Scarpetta and Marino have fairly high status and it is possible that Susan and Trent respond to this by becoming somewhat uncertain. On the subject of interruptions, my findings do not support the suggestion that women do not interrupt as much as men; Scarpetta interrupts more than any of the other characters in the story. Perhaps this has to do with her apparent power and authority. She uses both mitigated and explicit directives and commands, depending on who she talks to and the same goes for Marino.
Looking at tentative and direct speech, Scarpetta and Marino are talking in much the same way.

It has been suggested that women use more standard varieties of a language, while men use more vernacular and this is where Scarpetta’s and Marino’s ways of talking differ the most. Scarpetta is always grammatically correct and she rarely uses any slang. Marino, on the other hand, speaks a non-standard variety where the grammar is different from Scarpetta’s, and he uses a lot of slang. As an educated woman in a high position, Scarpetta probably needs to speak the way she does to be taken seriously and apparently she has trained herself to speak as she does, but Marino is a police officer and police work is often tied to the working-class, which is tied to toughness, which, in turn, is associated with vernacular speech.

Swearing is also associated with toughness and masculinity and since anger and swearing can intimidate, they can increase a person’s power. It has been claimed, though, that this is only true for men; women are rarely considered threatening when angry. It has also been suggested that even if the stereotype of the woman who never swears is incorrect, profane language is often thought of as something not suited for women. Scarpetta does swear, though, although not as much and not as explicitly as Marino. The only emotions Scarpetta really shows are anger and frustration, the two emotions associated with swearing, and it is mostly then Scarpetta swears.

When Scarpetta wants to be seen as a professional, she uses specialized language. When she then has to explain it to the other characters it gives her power and authority. Scarpetta also uses professional language as the narrator, but then explains it to the reader in non-specialized terms. This type of code-switching gives her status and the reader understands why she has reached the top.

To sum up, then. Scarpetta only occasionally follows the patterns of women’s talk that many researchers have found. This could mean that she has adopted some male characteristics
and this could be due to the fact that she is a woman in a high occupational position. The evidence is not clear, though. One possibility is that the author of *Cruel & Unusual* does not agree with the picture of women as being tentative and less authoritative, or she wants to change it; “Women readers reading women writers writing women characters righting wrongs” (Klein 3).

9. Works Cited

**Primary Source(s)**


**Secondary Sources**


