

"Do you know where the railway station is?"
Do men and women give different kinds of directions when they are asked a question like this?



This is a language investigation for students who want to go out into the community to find out about everyday language use.

Linguistic research suggests that men and women give different kinds of directions, but researchers have mostly used role plays where people act out the parts of a person asking the way and a person trying to help them. You could find out whether men and women really do give different kinds of directions in real life.

Questions to investigate

The role play research suggests that when they give directions:

women are more likely to mention a landmark, like a block of flats or a big tree;

women are more likely to mention the name of a road that you need to go down;

men are more likely to estimate how far you need to go ("*it's about 100 metres from here*") or how long it will take you to get there ("*it's about five minutes walk*")

men are more likely to indicate the direction ("*turn left at the end of the road*" or "*it's south of here*")

Also, the role playing research suggests that women make more mistakes than men do when they give directions!



How to investigate

Get ready

(1) Prepare a page in a notebook, like the one on page 3. You will note down the important points about the directions people give you on this page.

(2) Choose your research site. You will need to look lost, standing somewhere that's about 300 metres away from your local railway station, bus station, post office, hospital or some other well known location. The station, hospital or whatever you have chosen, should be within walking distance from where you are standing and ideally getting there should involve going down a couple of streets and turning corners

Go into the community

Stand in the spot you have chosen and ask a passer by:

"Excuse me, are you from round here?"

If they say "no", just thank them and let them go

If they say yes, ask:

"Do you know where the railway station is?" (or the post office, hospital, or whatever you have chosen as the destination).

Record your data

As soon as the passer by has moved on, fill in the columns for "person 1" on your record sheet. You might like to work with a friend, who can stand a little way away and do the record keeping. If you do the investigation alone, don't fill in the columns until the passer by has moved on (in case they think something funny is going on!).

Get more data

When they are out of sight, stop another person and do this all over again. Repeat until you have records for at least 5 men and 5 women. If you have time, ask more people - the more records you take, the more reliable your investigation will be!

TIP



Try to stop people of about the same age. You never know - younger people may give directions differently to older people!

Analyse your data

Once you've filled in all the columns, you can look to see whether the men and the women that you stopped really did behave like the men and women in the role play research. For instance, look to see how many men

and how many women mention a landmark.

Don't forget to see how many men and how many women made mistakes! It could be interesting to see what kind of mistakes people make: for example, one researcher found that the only mistakes people made were about the number of traffic lights that would be passed on the way to the destination.

In conclusion

What did you find? Do men and women give different kinds of directions? If they did, why might this be? Some researchers suggest that women are more interested in the details of what you'll see as you walk along, but men think it is more helpful to give precise indications of what will be involved, such as how far you need to go. Did you find this?

Suggested reading:

Jennifer D. Ewald (2010) "Do you know where X is?" Direction-giving and male/female direction givers. *Journal of Pragmatics* 42: 2549-2562.

(Click [here](#) for a summary of this paper)

Record: Asking directions

	male or female	mentions landmark	mentions name of road	guesses distance	guesses time	indicates direction	mistakes?	other comments
person 1								
person 2								
person 3								
person 5								
person 6								
person 7								
person 8								
person 9								
person 10								