

# The lowdown on women and up-talking

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Imagine you're on an overseas flight and the pilot's voice interrupts your movie with a series of announcements disconcertingly phrased as questions: "Ladies and gentlemen? We're expecting heavy turbulence in the next little while? You'll want to remain seated, with your seat belts fastened?" You'd probably feel a little unnerved by the up-talking uncertainty.

Or let's say a blood-gushing wound sends you to the emergency room, and the intake clerk addresses you with "vocal fry" – that low, creaky, back-of-the-throat monotone typical of the Kardashian sisters or Aubrey Plaza's character in *Parks and Recreation*. Conveying an ultra-cool detachment, the affect might inspire you to look around for someone who actually seems to care about your state.

Both of these vocal habits are common among young women, and last week, author Naomi Wolf noted in *The Guardian* the degree to which those who use them are judged to be less capable or intelligent. She advised young women to master stronger voices. As a communications specialist who trains women of all ages to write and speak in ways that enhance, not undermine, their credibility, I feel her pain.

But I'd like to modify her solution.

Women's higher voices are pitched closer to children's than men's are, so it's not surprising that lower tones are heard as more commanding – a perception regrettably reinforced by the ubiquitous male voice of authority dominating apocalyptic film trailers. The reality is that although some women run companies and govern countries, many are still unfairly sidelined as too shrill or apologetic, too bossy or softspoken, by turns.

As recently as 20 years ago, music stations refused to play two female recording artists

back to back, convinced listeners would switch channels if subjected to consecutive women's voices. And yet, the likes of Sarah McLachlan, Sheryl Crow, Beyoncé and Taylor Swift proved them wrong.

So it's past time to challenge the broader "male vocal style is desirable but female vocal style needs fixing" default. In fact, given the continuing unconscious cultural biases against women's voices, it's impressive to consider the innovative means women have developed to be heard.

Inserting verbal question marks into sentences is often evidence of a generous impulse aimed at building consensus or ensuring that listeners understand what's being said. Asking "Don't you think?" after an assertion invites others to participate. It's also a sophisticated strategy to employ if your safety and well-being – or that of your children or community – depend on you sharing critically important insights, without appearing to oppose those who hold power.

And if you've learned that, as a woman, your chances of being interrupted are significantly higher than your male colleagues, adopting run-on sentences to make sure you at least get to voice your concerns constitutes an inspired adaptive response. Similarly, vocal fry might just be a clever means of countering the very speech tendencies – too high pitched, too emotionally expressive – for which women are often criticized.

I regularly urge women to eliminate the taglines, equivocation and up-talking that result in others deeming them superficial airheads rather than competent colleagues or potential hires. But I would really love to live in a world that also encourages men to question their own conversational practices, recognizes the possible value of uncertainty and celebrates the instinct to seek confirmation, rather than definitively state "the truth" without acknowledging its "as I see it" codicil.

Take the deluded clown who shouts from the bleachers to the professional player on the field, "I could do better blindfolded!" Or the self-aggrandizing colleague who inflates his

pedestrian experiences into unrecognizable accomplishments. Or the guy who dominates meetings with ill-informed opinions dressed up as facts. In many circumstances, indefensible conviction can be considerably more dangerous than apologetic hesitancy. (Think any dictator, belligerent drunk or Donald Trump.)

Last year, New York Times columnist David Brooks cited research in support of his contention that the world suffers a lot more from overconfidence than it does from underconfidence. I'm with him. I think there's a sweet spot somewhere in between that would serve us all – a place where (stereotypically male) bravado is balanced by a bit of (stereotypically female) self-questioning, where women are no longer expected to do all of the adapting.

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