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Can We Just, Like, Get Over the Way Women Talk?

By Ann Friedman



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Like, have you ever noticed that women apologize too much? Sorry, but just humor me for a second here. What if, um, how we're speaking is actually part of what's undermining us in the workplace, in politics, and anywhere in the public sphere where we want to be taken seriously? I think it could be time for us all to assess how we're talking. Does that make sense to you, too?

It makes sense to tech-industry veteran Ellen Leanse, who [explains](#) that women overuse the word *just*, which sends "a subtle message of subordination." Essayist [Sloane Crosley](#) and comedian [Amy Schumer](#) tell us not to say "sorry" so often. A career coach warns the readers of [Goop](#) that women use too many qualifiers ("I'm no expert, but ..."), which undermine their opinions. Radio listeners [complain](#) of "vocal fry" that makes it impossible to listen to women. And according to a Hofstra University professor, women who suffer from [upspeak](#) — also known as "Valley Girl lilt"? — reveal "an unexplainable lack of confidence" in their opinions when they turn declarative sentences into questions.

As someone who's never been shy about opening her mouth and telling you exactly what she thinks, this barrage of information about the problems inherent in women's speech has me questioning my own voice. Here I am, thinking that I'm speaking normally and sharing my thoughts on campaign-finance reform or the Greek debt crisis or the politics of marriage, when apparently the only thing that other people are hearing is a passive-aggressive, creaky mash-up of Cher Horowitz, Romy and Michele, and the Plastics. I'm as much a fan of these fictional heroines as the next woman, but I want people to hear what I'm saying and take me seriously.

At first blush, all of this speaking advice sounds like empowerment. Stop sugarcoating everything, ladies! Don't hedge your requests! Refuse to water down your opinions! But are women the ones who need to change? If I'm saying something intelligent and all a listener can hear is the way I'm saying it, whose problem is that?

"All the discussion is about what we *think* we hear," the feminist linguist Robin Lakoff tells me. Lakoff is a professor emerita at the University of California, Berkeley, and, 40 years ago, pioneered the study of language and gender. "With men, we listen for what they're saying, their point, their assertions. Which is what all of us want others to do when we speak," Lakoff says. "With women, we tend to listen to how they're talking, the words they use, what they emphasize, whether they smile."

Men also use the word *just*. Men engage in *upspeak*. Men have *vocal fry*. Men pepper their sentences with unnecessary "*likes*" and "*sorrys*." I haven't read any articles encouraging them to change this behavior. The supposed distinctions between men's and women's ways of talking are, often, not that distinct. "Forty years after Lakoff's groundbreaking work, we've learned that all such generalizations are over-generalizations: none of them are true for every woman in every context (or even most women in most contexts)," *writes* feminist linguist and blogger Debbie Cameron. "We've also learned that some of the most enduring beliefs about the way women talk are not just over-generalizations, they are — to put it bluntly — lies." Maybe we don't sound like a pack of Cher Horowitzes after all.

Still, I care about good diction — I want to be heard and understood. When I'm writing, it's easy to do a control-F for "I think" and delete all of the wishy-washy words that are diluting my opinions. When I'm speaking, it's much harder to notice which linguistic tics I exhibit. And until I started co-hosting a podcast, I was fairly oblivious to my own vocal patterns. Then the emails and tweets started rolling in, advising me and my co-host that we would sound a lot smarter if we could just pay a bit more attention to our speech. The list of complaints mirrors the advice-driven articles I've seen scattered over the internet lately. "Fingernails on a chalkboard," wrote one reviewer on iTunes. "One has up-talk, the other has vocal fry and both use the word like every frigging third word. ... These are the ladies Amy Schumer goofs on."

It quickly became apparent that if we were to take the advice of all of our detractors — carefully enunciating, limiting our *likes*, moderating our tone to avoid vocal fry — our podcast would sound very different. It would be stripped of its cadence and its meaning; it would lose the casual, friendly tone we wanted it to have and its special feeling of intimacy. It wouldn't be ours anymore. "This stuff is just one more way of telling powerful women to *shut up you bitch*," says Lakoff. "It makes women self-conscious and makes women feel incompetent and unable to figure out the right way to talk." She adds, "There is no right way." Especially if you want to sound like *yourself*, and not some weird, stilted robot.

Indeed, as with salary negotiations in which women are damned if they don't ask for a raise and penalized for being overly aggressive *if they do*, tweaking speech to be more direct and less deferential comes with its own consequences. "When women talk in ways that are common among women, and are seen as ineffective or underestimated, they're told it's their fault for talking that way," the linguist Deborah Tannen, who's written several best-selling books about gender and language, told me. "But if they talk in ways that are associated with authority, and are seen as too aggressive, then that, too, is their fault when people react negatively." Asking women to modify their speech is just another way we are asked to internalize and compensate for sexist bias in the world. We can't win by eliminating *just* from our emails and *like* from our conversations.

Lakoff argues that the very things career coaches advise women to cut out of their speech are actually signs of highly evolved communication. When we use words like *so*, *I guess*, *like*, *actually*, and *I mean*, we are sending signals to the listener to help them figure out what's new, what's important, or what's funny. We're connecting with them. "Rather than being weakeners or signs of fuzziness of mind, as is often said, they create cohesion and coherence between what speaker and hearer together need to accomplish — understanding and sharing," Lakoff says. "This is the major job of an articulate social species. If women use these forms more, it is because we are better at being human."

Language is not *always about making an argument* or conveying information in the cleanest, simplest way possible. It's often about building relationships. It's about making yourself understood and trying to understand someone else. As anyone who's ever shared an inside joke knows, it's *fun*. This can be true even at work or in public — places where women are most likely to be dismissed because of the way they speak. To assume that our verbal tics are always negative is to assume that the goal of all speech is the same. Which of course is patently ridiculous.

Maybe women *are* undermining themselves a bit when they, like, speak in a way they find more natural. But only in the sense that they are seeking to articulate their thoughts more authentically and connect more directly with the people listening to them. Next time I read some advice from a podcast listener or from some self-styled expert on the internet about how women are too creaky-voiced, too apologetic, or using a word too much, I know exactly how I'll respond: As if.

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