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A-level ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Paper 2: Language diversity and change

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The start of a feature article about women's language from *The Guardian* website.

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Feminism
Opinion

Young women, give up the vocal fry and reclaim your strong female voice



Naomi Wolf

What's heartbreaking about the trend for destructive speech patterns is that yours is the most transformational generation – you're disowning your power

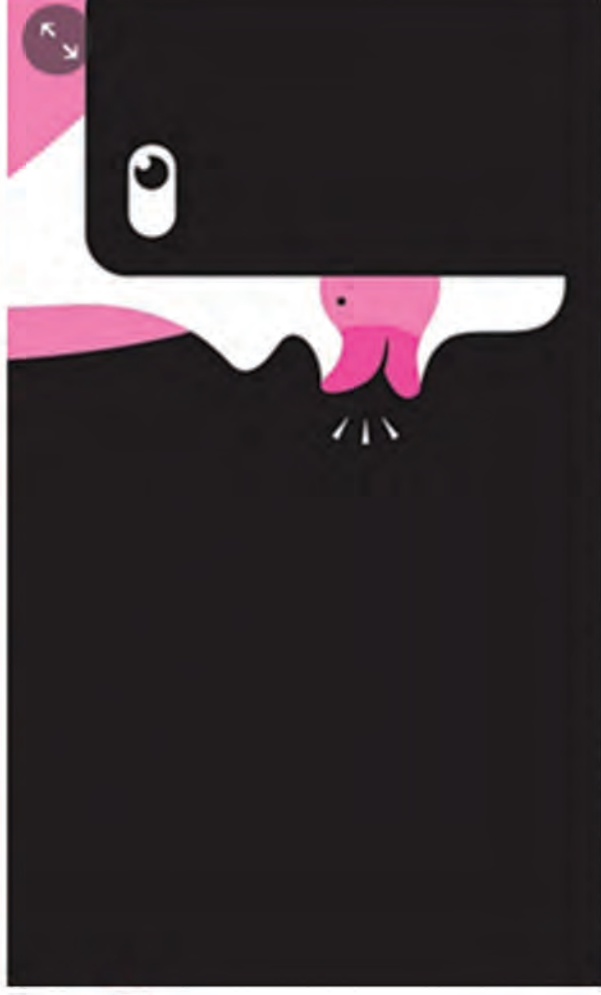
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A study found that this speech pattern makes young women who use it sound less competent, less trustworthy, less educated and less hireable. Illustration: Noma Bar

Patriarchy is inventive. The minute a generation of women has figured out how to not be enslaved by Ideology A, some new cultural pressure arises in the form of Internalisation B, making sure they don't get too far too fast. The latest example: the most empowered generation of women ever – today's twentysomethings in North America and Britain – is being hobbled in some important ways by something as basic as a new fashion in how they use their voices.

This demographic of women tends to have a distinctive speech pattern. Many commentators have noticed it, often with dismay. [Time magazine devoted a column to the mannerism](#) called [vocal fry](#), noting a study that found that this speech pattern makes young women who use it sound less competent, less trustworthy, less educated and less hireable: “Think Britney Spears and the Kardashians.”

“Vocal fry” is that guttural growl at the back of the throat, as a [Valley girl](#) might sound if she had been shouting herself hoarse at a rave all night. The less charitable refer to it privately as painfully nasal, and to young women in conversation sounding like ducks quacking. “Vocal fry” has joined more traditional young-women voice mannerisms such as run-ons, breathiness and the dreaded question marks in sentences (known by linguists as uptalk) to undermine these women's authority in newly distinctive ways. [Slate notes](#)¹ that older men (ie those in power over young women) find it intensely annoying. One study by a “deeply annoyed” professor, found that young women use “uptalk” to seek to hold the floor. But does cordially hating these speech patterns automatically mean you are anti-feminist?

Many devoted professors, employers who wish to move young women up the ranks and business owners who just want to evaluate personnel on merit flinch over the speech patterns of today's young women. “Because of their run-on sentences, I can't tell in a meeting when these young women have said what they have to say,” confided one law partner.

“Their constant uptalk means I am constantly having to reassure them: ‘uh-huh, uh-huh, uh-huh’. It's exhausting.”

I myself have inadvertently flinched when a young woman barraging a group with uptalk ran a technology-based conference call: “We'll use Ruby on Rails? It is an MVC framework to support databases?” Well, will we?

One 29-year-old woman working in engineering told me it was easier for gatekeepers in her male-dominated field to disregard running-on, softspoken, vocally frying and uptalking women. “It is difficult for young women to be heard or even responded to in many male-dominated fields if they don't strengthen their voices, That kind of disregarding response from men made me feel even softer and even lesser – in a vicious circle of silencing,” she said.

¹Slate: An online magazine of news, politics, technology and culture.