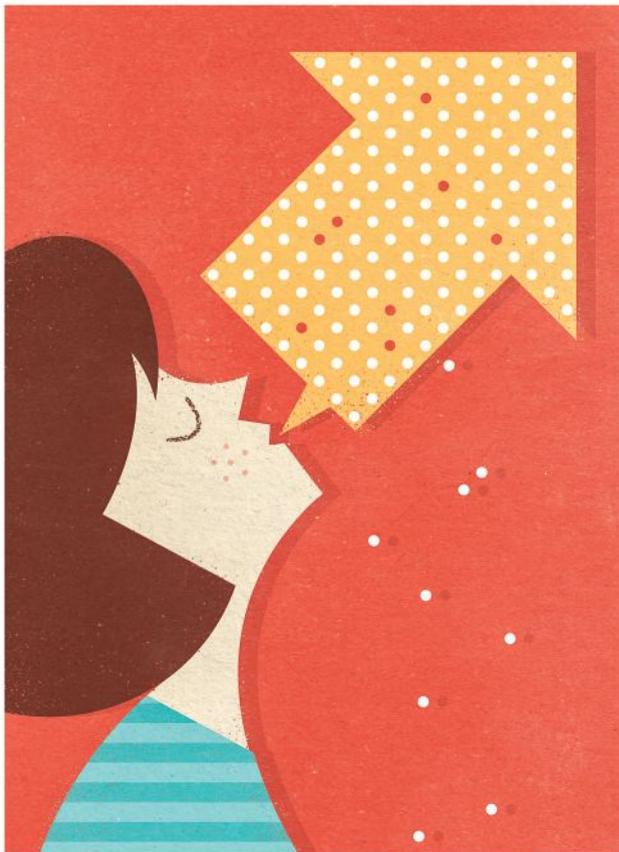


The Rise of Women?



Sometimes people's statements end like questions? It's a habit called uptalk? You might find it annoying?

If so, you're not alone. Thomas Linneman, a sociologist at William & Mary, was so irritated by uptalk in his college classroom that he decided to study it. "More than we'd like to admit," he says, "social science research projects are born out of pet peeves." From his research, Linneman discovered uptalk is more than an irksome habit: It might serve to reinforce existing gender norms.

Linneman focused his

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ILLUSTRATION BY **Zara Picken**

study on 100 episodes of *Jeopardy!*, which he watched mostly in the evenings, on his couch with his dog at his feet. As the episodes played, he noted when contestants ended their answers with a rising intonation (uptalk) versus a flat or downward one, and he also documented the contestants' demographic details, how far ahead or behind they were in the game, and whether they were supplying a first answer or correcting an opponent.

Given its stereotypical association with Southern California's "valley girls," you might not be surprised to learn that women uptalked more than one and a half times as often as men. Perhaps signaling a lack of

confidence, uptalk was also much more common for incorrect answers as correct ones. Women answering incorrectly uptalked a whopping 76 percent of the time.

But then the analysis gets interesting: While men who were \$10,000 ahead of their nearest competitors uptalked less than men who were \$10,000 behind, women in the lead uptalked more frequently than their losing female counterparts. And while men correcting other men uptalked less often, their uptalk frequency more than doubled if they were correcting a woman's answer.

Women's uptalk doesn't just indicate uncertainty, Linneman concludes; it's also meant to compensate for success. Men, on the other hand, don't want to seem uncertain around other men, but use uptalk when correcting women as "a weird form of chivalry," he says. "They're in a public arena, they're telling a woman [she's] wrong, and they know they have to be careful about how they do it."

Uptalk is thought to have first become common among some young people in New Zealand and Australia in the 1950s and 1960s, and then, probably independently, in the United States in the 1980s. But Mark Liberman, a professor of linguistics at the University of Pennsylvania who often writes about uptalk for his blog "Language Log," says uptalk has probably been the default pattern of speech for a thousand years or so in some varieties of English in the

Could uptalking at the end of sentences be keeping women down?

British Isles. Any evidence for its popularity and spread is anecdotal at best. Still, he says, if uptalk did arise with valley girl culture, "it's possible that it began with the children and grandchildren of the Okies, who migrated to the West Coast in the 1930s."

Though Linneman's study is a clever way to tackle a speech pattern unlikely to survive in written records, it has limits. For one, it's about *Jeopardy!*, not real conversation. "By the nature of the game, the contestants are likely to be uncertain," Liberman says. They're also answering in the form of a question.

Researchers don't even know for sure if in typical conversation, uptalk is more common among women, or if it's a marker of uncertainty, never mind self-deprecation. People often use uptalk when ordering multiple items, Liberman points out. For example: I want two poppy seed bagels? One sesame? And a pound of lox? In this context, uptalk might be a way for speakers finishing a thought to check in with their listeners, a tool to help people connect. —JESSICA GROSS